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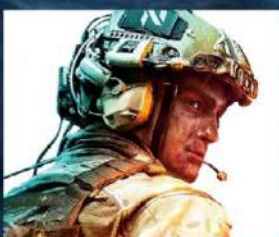
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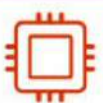
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“COMPANY OF HEROES 3 MIGHT BE ITS MOST EXCITING GAME YET”



No genre ever really dies these days – it just takes a break while it waits for a comeback. It happened for isometric RPGs, it happened for point-and-click adventures, and, buddy, it's about to happen for real-time strategy games.

Who better to lead the charge than Relic, long-time king of the genre? *Company of Heroes 3* might be its most

exciting game yet – an ambitious, explosive sequel that, after a marathon hands-on session, had our strategy buff Fraser genuinely the most thrilled I've ever seen him be about a game. Read our huge cover feature, and get the same look in your eye he has.

Robin

ROBIN VALENTINE
PRINT EDITOR
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The PC Gamer team



FRASER BROWN
Twitter
@FraserIBrown

This month
Cracked a smile for the first time since I've known him. All it took was a bit of devastating warfare.



CHRIS LIVINGSTON
Twitter
@screencuisine

This month
Figured out how to play as King Kong in *GTA V*, and made 300 fewer monkey puns than I would have.



SARAH JAMES
Twitter
@vision_burn

This month
Joined the team as our new guides writer! She knows where all the little things you can't find are.



RACHEL WATTS
Twitter
@rachel_watts

This month
Discovered how much ghosts have to teach us in *Phantom Abyss*. Get the ouija board out.

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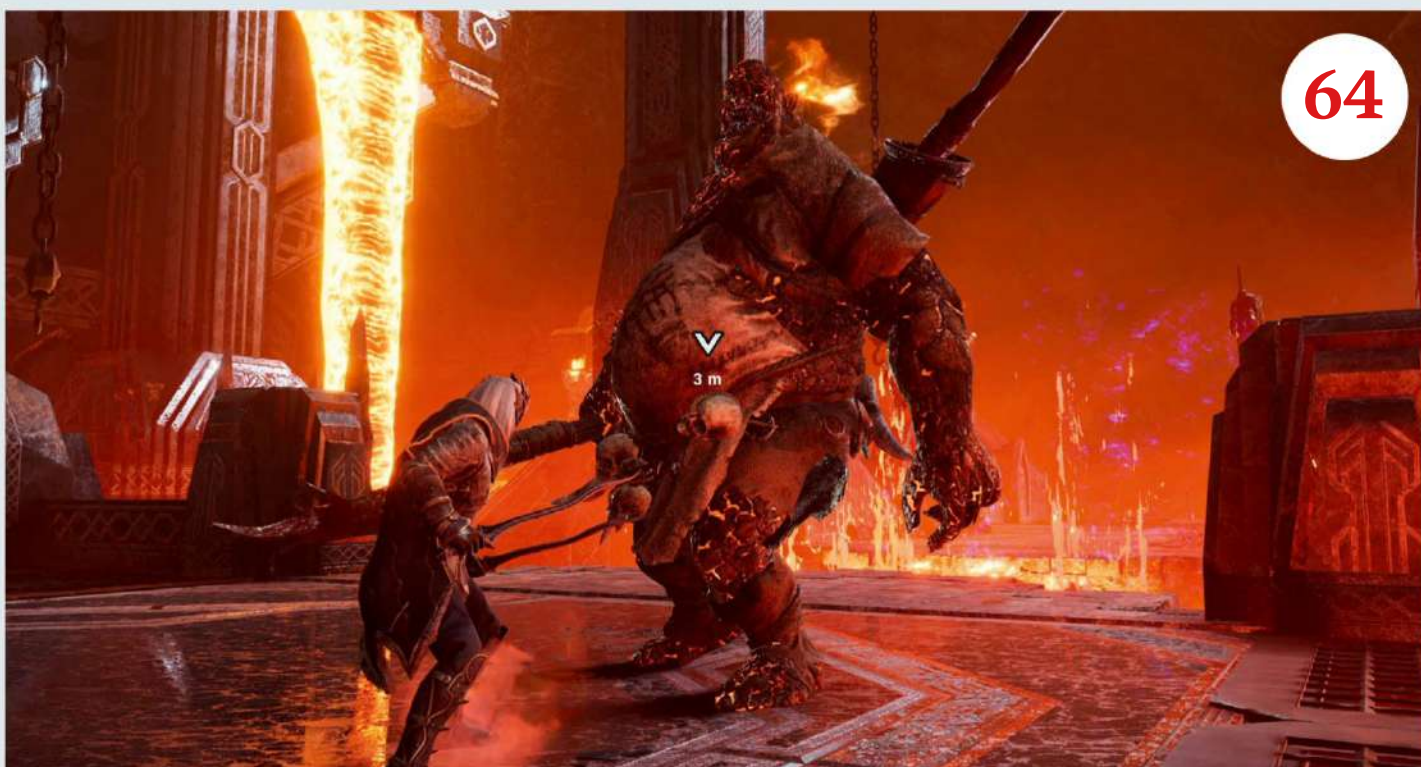
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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



ALPHA STRIKE

MINECRAFT archivists finally uncover the rarest known build of the game

One woman's habit of never deleting files may have made her a legend in the *Minecraft* archival scene, after it was discovered she was still holding onto an ultra-rare piece of the game's history.

In 2010, *Minecraft* was still in alpha, updating on an almost weekly basis as the game found its feet. One of these builds, Alpha 1.1.1, added fishing rods and ducking, but also came with a nasty bug that crashed the game with a grey screen. A mere 3.25 hours later, that issue would be remedied by Alpha 1.1.2. Between its brief lifespan

and buggy release, the previous patch was all but forgotten. Not so by *Minecraft*'s archival scene though. Blocky historians have spent years trying to account for every part of *Minecraft*'s development history, and Alpha 1.1.1 was one pain point. Few people downloaded it, fewer still kept it around given its crashing habit.

**SOME VERIFICATION
WITH THE MODS
LATER, AND IT
WAS SETTLED**

Fortunately, coder Luna (@lunasorcery) wasn't in the habit of deleting broken old game downloads. "Used to play *Minecraft* quite a bit on my old laptop," Luna wrote on Twitter back in June. "My data organising wasn't great at the time so it wasn't uncommon for me to have a mess of multiple versions sitting about in my downloads folder."

"In 2011 I got my first desktop computer, and never really played anything on that laptop again. In the years following, I wiped and reinstalled the laptop's OS multiple times – but, in the interests of not losing personal data, I took a backup of the user profiles first."

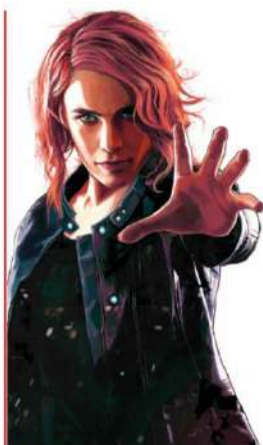
WINDOWS 11 IS HERE

SAME AS THE OLD BOSS?



Yes, there's a new Windows in town. Though we're pretty sure it was originally just a Windows 10 update,

Windows 11 is being touted as a whole new OS. We're gaming on a preview build right now, which isn't *too* buggy (yet), and the final release is pegged for the Autumn this year. ■ **DJ**



CODENAME: CONDOR

MORE CONTROL



Remedy announced that it's signed a deal with publisher 505 Games to develop a new multiplayer PvE spinoff of *Control*, codenamed *Condor*. Not only that, but the studio also hinted that it's planning a "bigger budget" *Control* game which could very well be a full-blown sequel. Fingers crossed. ■ **RW**

CHAOS THEORY

STRANGER OF PARADISE



Did Square Enix find my old anime fanfiction? *Final Fantasy Origin* is overflowing with teenage angst and a frightening amount of cringe. Nobody could decide if the E3 trailer was the best or worst thing they'd seen in years, but I for one gladly welcome our Chaos-killing friends. Chaos, chaos, chaos! ■ **MT**



TOP: *Minecraft* looked a lot less cluttered back in 2010.

ABOVE: Omniarchive's, err, subdued response to the news.

RARE FORM

Luna's Twitter thread explained that, for *Minecraft* archival group Omniarchive, 1.1.1 was treated as a kind of holy grail. Miraculous, then, that one of their number happened to stumble upon a tweet she made in 2010 that simply read "ooooooooohhhhhh *Minecraft* update!". The timestamp on that tweet lined up exactly within the period the elusive patch would have been available.

The first person to DM Luna about the tweet was met with silence (she writes that she may have "just having a bad day"). But months later, a second notification prompted her to plug in an old USB hard drive and give it a look. Lo and behold, there were several *Minecraft* builds, one of which matched the time of release for 1.1.1. A little digging in the files later, and she'd confirmed it. "I posted in the Omniarchive [discord server], and it would be an understatement to say that a few people noticed."

Some verification with the mods later, and it was settled. This was the elusive build. The server "exploded", years of effort trying to uncover this rare build coming together with an incidental tweet. Luna's files even had another, slightly less rare build – another treasure that may have been lost to time if not for a remarkably persistent hard drive. Moral of the story: never delete anything.

Nat Clayton

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Team Fortress 2

An update put a cap on the bot issue, leading to a huge spike in players.

Halo modding

The Master Chief Collection's latest update brought back a host of modding tools from the first game's original 2003 port.

Dark Souls: Nightfall

A fan-made 'sequel' to From Software's dead hard RPG is coming this December with remixed levels.

Oculus Rift

Facebook's attempts to cram ads into VR games led to such massive backlash that its test developer backed out of the trial.

Far Cry: Goldeneye

After three years, Ubisoft took down one fan's ambitious remake of *GoldenEye 007* within *Far Cry 5*.

Dogmeat

River, the dog who provided the face and motions for *Fallout 4*'s Dogmeat, passed away in June.

LOWS



The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

Before embarking on this multi-decade assignment to gather videogame rumours for a print publication – a mission that has lasted far longer than makes any logical sense in the context of videogames, print publications, or espionage – The Spy, of course, received extensive training in the art of concealment and obfuscation. It's not enough, for instance, to just use a fake name; the enemy expects that. Instead, you should construct a fake persona so unbelievable as to resemble a procession of staff writers grasping at any stray thought in an effort to fill this page on the day before deadline. This has the added benefit of letting you get away with pretty much anything. This column opened with an absurdly indulgent 49 word sentence, and somehow the first paragraph is both *still* going and about to drop a *second* semi-colon. And yet it's fine; it's all part of the ruse.

Trust, then, that when The Spy writes, "reader, it must be The Spy's birthday", The Spy isn't actually proffering a scrap of identifying information. Or, at least, if The Spy *is*, The Spy is so thoroughly couching that in impenetrable meta whimsy as to leave you in reasonable doubt as to whether that's actually the case.

And with that out of the way: reader, it must be The Spy's birthday. For months now, The Spy has been

tracking the *GTA VI* rumours being spread across the internet, supported by unreliable websites desperate to rank for such a high-volume SEO term by printing literally anything about the game no matter how dubious the source. Now, though, in a shock twist to the usual format, a suite of rumours has emerged that – while still unconfirmed – have an unusual air of credibility to them.

IT EXISTS! SORT OF

This new set of claims come from Tom Henderson, a known *Battlefield* leaker who previously and accurately revealed some *Battlefield 2042* details ahead of DICE's E3 announcement. While Henderson's video on *GTA VI* features the usual suite of caveats and some educated guesswork, it's made more believable through its support from other industry analysts. The key claim made is to do with *GTA VI*'s release date, which is perhaps further afield than you may have expected.

Henderson claims *GTA VI* is still early in development and won't launch until at least 2024, thanks in part to a greater focus by Rockstar on employee wellbeing in light of earlier reports into *Red Dead Redemption II*'s crunch period. Henderson also cites Rockstar's desire to wait until the most recent generation of consoles are more widely available, which makes sense.

As for what *GTA VI* will actually entail, Henderson claims it will be set in a modern day Vice City, and with a map that will change through DLC and updates after launch. This makes sense given the popularity of *GTA Online*, and the fact that it already functions as a live-service game. Once again, it's expected that the campaign will feature multiple characters, although Henderson notes that – for the first time in the series – one of its protagonists will be a woman.

While much of what Henderson has said has been heard before, Bloomberg's Jason Schreier went on to corroborate the infodump, tweeting that "everything Tom Henderson has said about the game matches up with what I've heard". If you're still dubious, that's fair: hopefully we'll find out more in about three to four years. Spy out. ■
The Spy

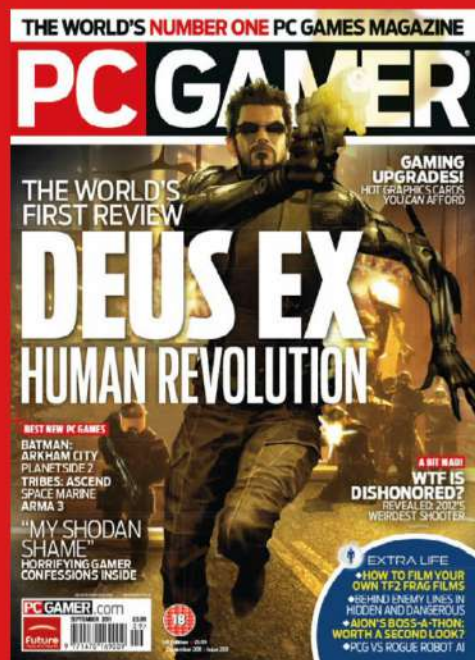
HENDERSON CLAIMS IT WILL BE SET IN A MODERN DAY VICE CITY



THE SPY

The Spy wouldn't steal a car, but would steal an identity.

This month in... 2011



1 PC Gamer 230 is a strong contender for the most stacked issue of 2011, filled with some of the decade's most endearing classics. It's headlined by the world's first review of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* – 94%, "A dark, cool and beautiful revival" – and supported by everything from *Dishonored* to *Arma 3* to *Tribes: Ascend*, may she rest in peace.

ISSUE
230, September 2011
ON THE COVER
Deus Ex: Human Revolution
IN THE CINEMAS
The Inbetweeners Movie

2 *Deus Ex* isn't the best scoring game of the issue. The free-to-play re-release of *Team Fortress 2* joins the handful of games to earn our highest score: 96%.



3 The team gets dressed up to each play a PC gaming classic they'd previously skipped to see if it holds up. That means Graham getting to grips with the original *Deus Ex*, Rich falling foul to the unforgiving save system of *Morrowind*, and Tom being quietly impressed by the first *System Shock*. Mostly, though, it's an excuse to look sad in party hats.



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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



VIDEODAMES

The grandma gamers of the **GRAND DAMES**

Shirley Curry, the ‘*Skyrim* Grandma’, became a YouTube celebrity in her 80s. Wit and a welcoming tone earned the videos where she explores *Skyrim* thousands of devoted followers. She’s not the only grandma gamer on YouTube, though. She’s one-quarter of the Grand Dames, four women who meet virtually once a month to record a livestream tea party. They have their own merch, including branded teacups, and a following who see their age not as a novelty but a feature. They bring a huge amount of life experience to their videos, and aren’t afraid to speak their minds.

“The Grand Dames started last year at PAX Online, the very first online PAX, and the title of our PAX panel was Tea With Grandma Gamers: Grandmas Talk Shit About Games,” explains Dame Jessa, the organiser and informal boss of the Grand Dames. “Although maybe it didn’t say ‘shit’, it had a bunch of cartoon curse icons.”

Though ‘grandma gamers’ is a label they happily apply themselves, Jessa says she’s never thought of herself as a gamer before now. “That’s because there’s a very narrow definition for a lot of people of what that is,” she says, “and also the idea of who that gamer tends to be: young, white, male. Then there’s the negative stereotypes: living in his mum’s basement, unwashed – and I’ve been to PAX

West, so I know the unwashed part. Merrie, back me up.” “Truth!” shouts Dame Merrie, the Texan of the group.

“Truth,” Jessa laughs. “I hadn’t smelled some smells like that since I’d been to Paris, there were some *heady* smells there. But anyway, seriously though, I’m learning that I love identifying as a gamer now. However, I still see myself primarily as a storyteller who uses games as the tool to tell the story, rather than being a gamer who plays games to win them, beat them, that kind of thing.”

Her ideal game for making stories is *The Sims 2*, which she’s been playing since 2004. “I was single at the time and I just remember that I played *The Sims 2*, when it first came out, every night,” she says. “Pretty much every single night unless I had some other plans – which I really didn’t – for a year maybe? And I had this whole long, wonderful mystery story. There was a murder mystery, I kind of did Agatha Christie in *The Sims 2* complete with a dead body.”

Dame Merrie prefers games that tell their own story and praises *Borderlands 2*, especially the fan-beloved Tiny Tina DLC. “When I finished it and the credits are rolling, I was just sobbing,” she says. “I was crying. It brought out that much emotion in me, and I felt every bit of her pain. It was like, ‘Oh my god, I can’t believe y’all did that to me.’ When a game can bring that out, and you’re just crying! I think I did scream and cry as bad as Tina, but I guess I get very emotionally invested in the storyline.”

Shirley, on her mod

“The thing that I kind of disliked, and I haven’t said anything to the developers because they’re so good, but I think she says, ‘Hold on there, tiger!’ too much. I mean, she says it for various things. Even when she runs into the character. At least Lydia and some of the others would say, ‘Ow!’ Like it was my fault they ran into me.”



AWESOME FOURSOME *The Grand Dames on games*



DAME SHIRLEY

"People get on my comments and say, 'How many times have you beat *Skyrim*?' I absolutely hate that phrase."



DAME JESSA

"I've always been drawn to story-based games... I say that I'm a gamer until somebody creates a holodeck."



DAME MERRIE

"My first game was *Pong*. We had the Atari console at home and I sat there all weekend with the little paddles."



DAME BRITTA

"If it's cosmetic [DLC] I have no interest in it whatsoever. My fashion sense is very low."



ELDER SCROLLS

When I talk to the Dames their fourth member is Britta, a New Zealander who loves JRPGs. This will prove to be her last month with the group, however, as she's retiring from livestreaming. "I think we are all old enough here, us ladies, to know that the moment you lose interest in something you've got a problem," she says when the subject of burnout comes up. "All of us never have a problem pursuing our interests and that's what keeps us going every day. Yeah, we know there's only so many days in a life. That becomes very clear as you get older and you jolly well make the most of it."

While the other dames play a variety of games, Shirley's devoted to *Skyrim*. Though you'll occasionally see her play *Ark*, or a horror game while wearing a skull mask for a Halloween 'Shirley after midnight' special, the open-endedness of Bethesda's RPG keeps her coming back. "I don't rush through the game just seeking quest after quest till I get to the end of the main quest," she says. "There's so much more to the game."

The popularity of Shirley's videos brought her to the attention of Bethesda, who plan to base a character on her in *The Elder Scrolls VI*. There's also a Shirley mod for

Skyrim that adds her as a follower who tells stories based on adventures she's had in her videos, and which she recorded the dialogue for.

These loyal mod-makers, YouTube followers, Patreon patrons, and PAX audiences enjoy spending time with the Grand Dames both in games and out of them. But why now in particular? Jessa has a theory, "This last year we had a global pandemic and it took away from people, early, a lot of their grandparents. A lot of people lost their grandparents last year. And when we started the Dames, I wasn't thinking about that at all. I mean, before the Dames even started we did the PAX panel, Britta and I were at the panel and both of us were very surprised how many people said, 'Oh, this reminds me of my grandma.'"

My apologies if that made you cry like Merrie at the end of a *Borderlands* DLC, but it's an aspect of why the grandma gamers matter right now. And they're only going to get more relevant. "We're a variety of ages, but we're paving the way," Merrie says. "All these 30-year-old gamers are someday gonna be 60, 70, 80. And they're going to know that we're already doing it, and you don't have to stop just because you're retired." ■

Jody Macgregor

TOP: Merrie models the official merch. Jessa is the group's benevolent mastermind and apparently a druid.

ABOVE: Shirley meets Todd Howard, creative director of *Skyrim*.

"I KIND OF DID AGATHA CHRISTIE IN THE SIMS 2 COMPLETE WITH A DEAD BODY"

Positive Influence

INSPIRATIONS AND CONNECTIONS IN GAMES

HIGH ROLLER

How **TERRY CAVANAGH** bet it all on the simple joy of platforming

In 2007, on the eve of what is now known as the Great Recession, a market risk analyst decided to quit his job and embark on a career which, from a risk mitigation perspective, his colleagues would have advised against

"I was young," Terry Cavanagh says. "A lot of my friends were doing things like going off to Australia for a year. At the time, the whole indie developer thing was just starting to really kick off. I saved up some money and decided to give it a go. The decision was my version of going to Australia." It didn't go very well. After many failed starts and projects that didn't pan out, Cavanagh ran out of money. He borrowed some cash from the bank in order to keep going, then ran out of that too.

"I'd come to the end of the whole thing, where I just had to say, 'This is not working out, I have to go and get a real job,'" he says. "And I was working on one last project, which was this little gravity-flipping platformer."

VVVVVV was Cavanagh's breakthrough, but it was also a break from form. His previous games had been serious and arty, part of a nascent indie scene reacting against AAA power fantasies. His most successful experiment, a Game Boy-esque platformer called *Don't Look Back*, had been a riff on the ancient Greek legend of Orpheus and Eurydice, about storming into Hades with a handgun. When the player led their dead lover back to the surface, they were confronted by the image of themselves still standing impotently at the graveside, as they had been at the beginning of the game, grief undefeated.

"I just remember being very proud of the idea that what you literally do in the game is play out this fantasy," Cavanagh says. "I wanted to be edgy and taken seriously. I don't know how I feel about all that now, [but] if art doesn't make you cringe a little bit, then you've not really exposed or pushed yourself as much as you could."

ROLLING SIXES

Faced with financial failure, Cavanagh rejected avant garde storytelling and embraced throwaway fun instead.

VVVVVV was self-consciously simple, a pop song of a platformer that picked just one, joyous mechanic – a button that flipped the polarity of your character – and honed it to perfection. "It turns out that's really a better direction," Cavanagh says. "My games got better when I started thinking of them that way."

The result was one of the great crossover hits of indie's first wave. Alongside *Super Meat Boy*, VVVVVV established a new approach to platforming difficulty, which matched brutal challenges to player-friendly checkpointing and instant resets. You can still see its influence in Maddy Thorson's *Celeste*, which is fitting since Cavanagh had been "influenced pretty heavily" by Thorson's early projects in the '00s. "It's one of those design things that feels obvious in hindsight, but wasn't always," he says.

After years working with metaphor to evoke complex emotions, VVVVVV's less cerebral approach somehow hit the spot emotionally too. Its one-dimensional cast emoted in binary – smiley face, sad face – in a way that bypassed the brain and went straight to the heart. "I wanted the characters to all have one personality that I pushed all the way to 11," Cavanagh says. "Victoria was always sad and totally inconsolable, and Vermillion was up for anything and happy to go exploring. There's no depth to them."

The story of VVVVVV's creation has become a pattern in Cavanagh's career since. *Super Hexagon* was a break from more serious work. Though Cavanagh has built many downbeat prototypes, the prospect of readying them for commercial release rarely appeals. "It's more fun to work on the other stuff," he says. Who would choose to tinker under dark clouds rather than sunny skies?

Cavanagh's gameography might be made up of repeating cycles, but one thing appears to have changed. He's no longer looking to escape from the "boring" job he took after college. In fact, as he goes into an explanation of Dicey Dungeons' approach to RNG, he sounds every bit the market risk analyst, "It's about mitigating randomness," he says, "and taking control of the odds." ■

Jeremy Peel

FREE WHERE?

Get a slice of Terry for nothing



ANYONE COULD BE STRUCK BY LIGHTNING AT ANY TIME

Self-explanatory multiplayer Roblox game about standing around on a rainy island, waiting to be blown apart by a bolt of electricity.



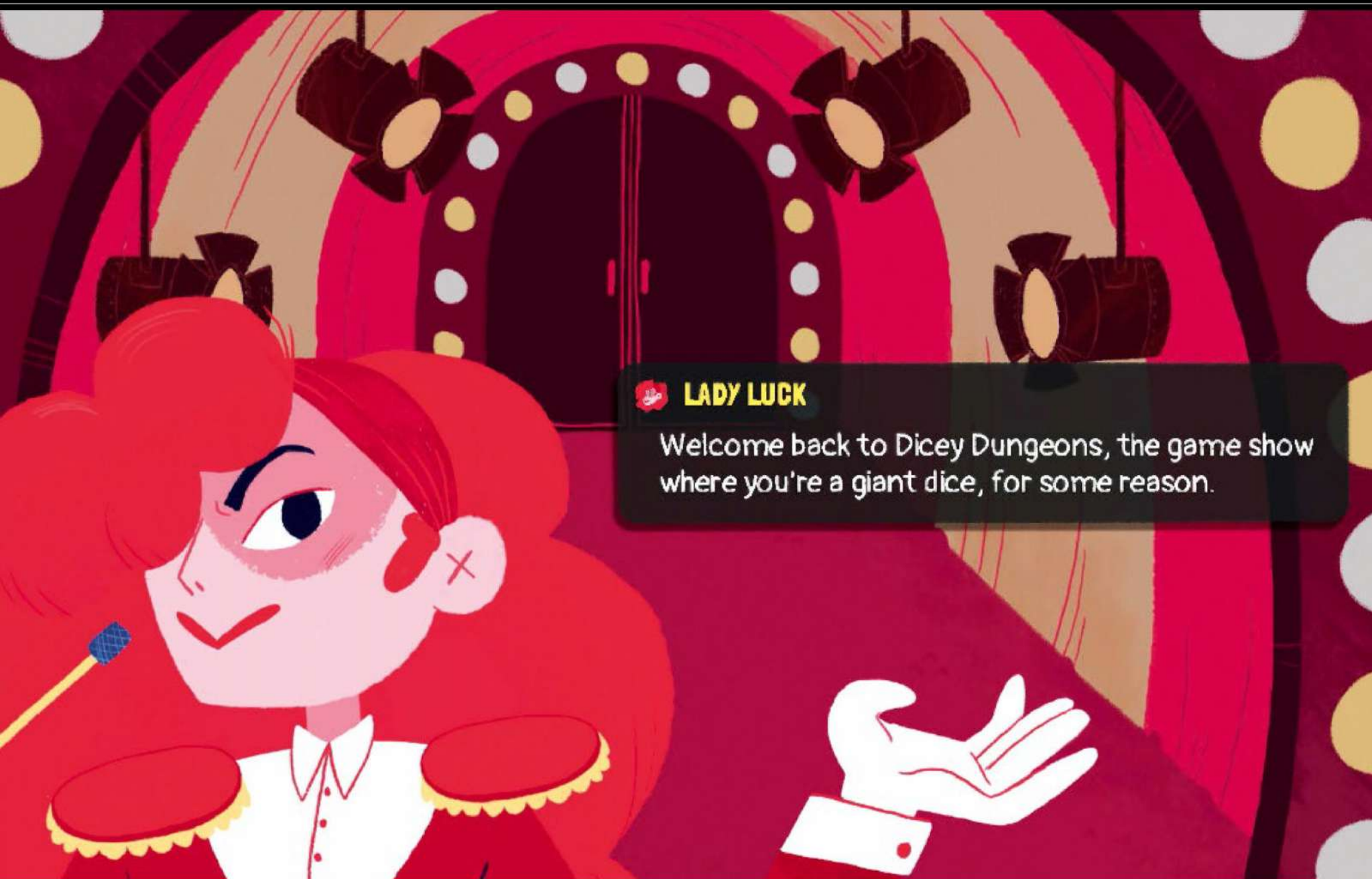
CLIMB THE GIANT MAN OBBY

A sweet and funny Roblox platformer about scaling the outside of a huge bloke, then hanging out in his bald spot with the other climbers. Think VVVVVV, but 3D.

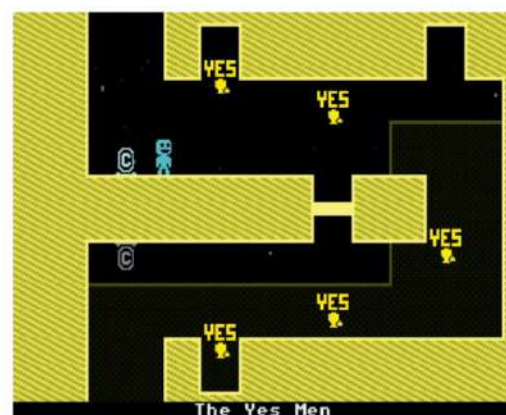


CONSTELLATION

Designed for parties and playable at justtpestuff.com, you just... type stuff, and it comes into being. Pictured: the first objects that come into a PC Gamer writer's head.



VVVVVV ESTABLISHED A NEW APPROACH TO PLATFORMING



FAR LEFT: *Super Hexagon* remains mesmerising.

BELOW: Viridian reassures Violet in VVVVVV.



DNA Tracing

GAMING'S LINEAGES EXPLORED



RAY OF LIGHT

How comedy, cartoons, and a connection to nature set **UBISOFT MONTPELLIER** apart

There's little to recommend the game that built Ubisoft Montpellier today. *Rayman* was a brutal hangover from the SNES and Mega Drive era of 2D platformers, a cruel cavalcade of spike pits and memory-test bosses. Its protagonist was a bequipped berk with no limbs and even less charisma; his world a nonsensical mishmash of poachers, pirates, and washerwomen, in which even static objects unsettled you with their big, googly eyes.

And yet there was still something about it. The scrolling was smooth, and those cartoon graphics stunned audiences at the time. Over four million played it, establishing Ubisoft as a publisher and Montpellier as an idiosyncratic part of the mainstream.

Then the series went 3D, which, thankfully, necessitated a total reinvention. *Rayman 2* kept the pirates, but scrapped the disparate stages. In interviews, the Montpellier team spoke of "coherence" – the idea that levels could start in the forest, sink progressively into the swamps, and emerge again on the coast by the end of the story. This attempt to give single-player campaigns a shape that honoured their fiction was the same that had wowed *Half-Life* players a year before, and elevated *Rayman 2* to more than the sum of its platforming parts. Rayman himself became something of an environmental avenger – the hero of a world which was fading fast, its heart 'exploded' by an army of slavers and industrialists. He was actually becoming borderline likeable and not totally detestable like some other platforming mascots that tend to flood videogames.

INFINITY AND BEYOND

By the time of the new millennium, Montpellier was made up of proficient worldbuilders, perfectly primed to make *Beyond Good & Evil*. While the picturesque planet of Hillys wasn't a true open world – rather a patchwork of Mediterranean townscapes and long lakes separated by brief loading screens – it grounded players in its strange setting by giving them the latitude to explore, by foot and by hovercraft.

The influences were as far-flung as any in the original *Rayman*, Ghibli-esque aesthetics bumping up against Bulgarian rap and rhinoceri in Jamaican dress. But this time, they cohered, thanks to the narrative glue laid by Ancel and his co-writer, Jacques Exertier.

Common themes in the studio's games began to emerge: their slapstick comedy, musical rhythm and appreciation for nature. Each one began at the foot of an old tree, and spiritually speaking, tied itself to the trunk – asking you to stand against the destruction of ecosystems and communities.

Beyond Good & Evil even armed players against greed and exploitation, teaching them to reject the spin of powerful interests and seek out the truth for themselves. It cast them as Jade, not a fighter but a photojournalist – somebody whose duty was to preserve and inform. Then it surrounded her with charming, bumbling characters, like the cantankerous pig Peyj, a clear update of Rayman's rotund-yet-rubbery amphibian sidekick, Globox. If Montpellier was going to serve up a bitter pill to the public, the studio was determined to hide the lesson in jelly, and laugh at the way it wobbled.

APE ESCAPE

Perhaps that sugar coating wasn't sweet enough; *Beyond Good & Evil* didn't sell very well. But it did cement Montpellier's reputation as Ubisoft's critical darlings, granting the publisher credibility beyond the *Clancy* franchise it had purchased with Red Storm. Somehow Peter Jackson got wind, and selected Montpellier to adapt King Kong. Ancel answered the call with an experimental FPS that jettisoned health bars and ammo counts in favour of exposing your whole face to the drenching rain of Skull Island.

Peter Jackson's *King Kong: The Official Game of the Movie*, as it's properly and hilariously called, teaches you to respect its natural world by making you its lunch. With a few bullets and whatever sharp bones you can wrench from the skeletons of fellow unfortunates, you're forced into a primordial battle with the local ecosystem – a frightening breeding ground for magnified insects and actual dinosaurs. The DNA of this desperate, survivalist

BEAT IT

Montpellier's greatest musical moments



RAYMAN LEGENDS – BLACK BETTY

When played well, *Rayman Origins* always verged on rhythm-action, but only in *Legends* did Montpellier build a level around timing your jumps music.



FROM DUST – THE BREATH

Your godlike power is first summoned into being by a didgeridoo and drums sesh. With the Breath on their side, your followers can speak to the world around them.



VALIANT HEARTS – CAN-CAN

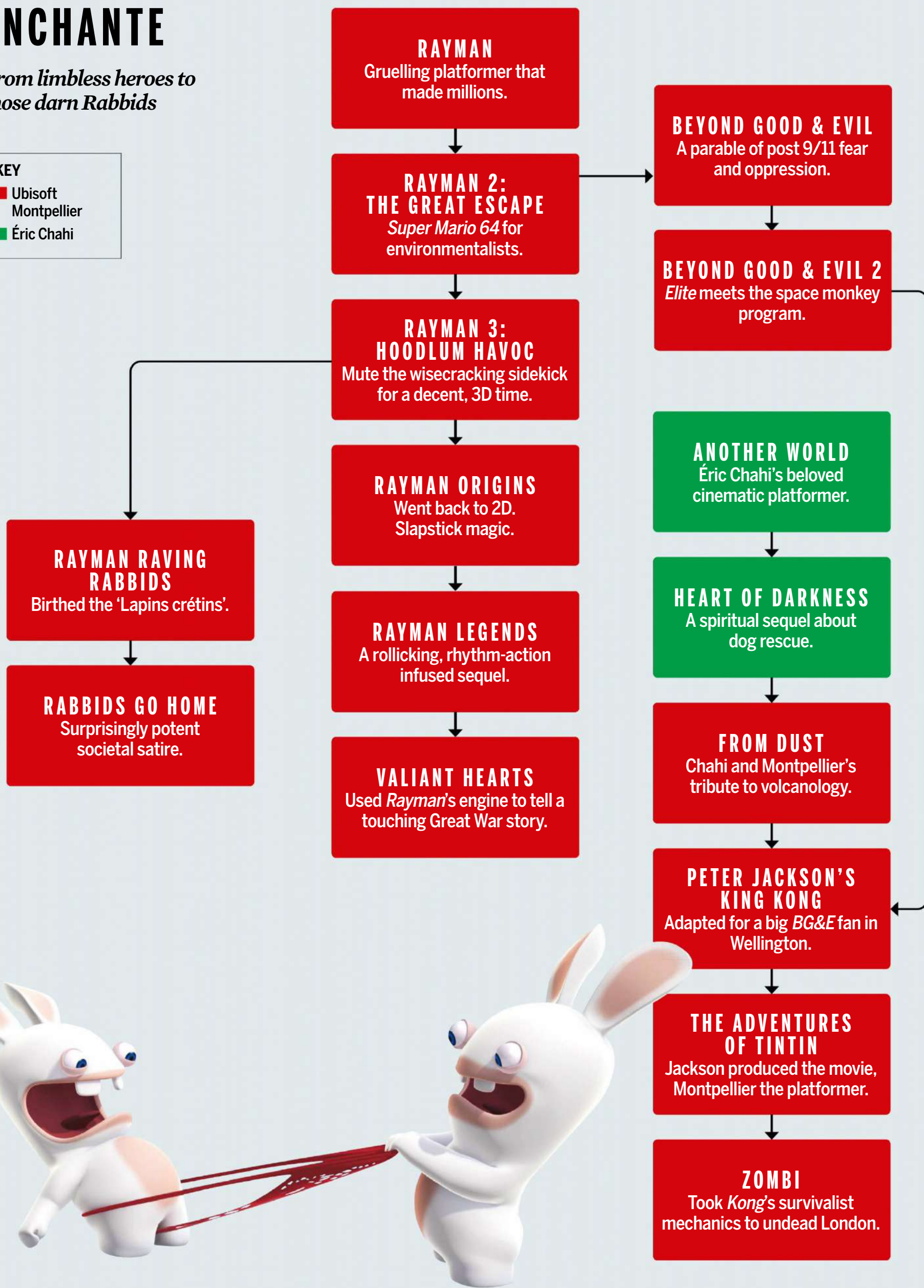
Fleeing Paris in a taxi while dodging erratic drivers to the parp of Offenbach's Galop Infernal – better known as the Can-Can music – is a distinctly French experience.

ENCHANTE

From limbless heroes to those darn Rabbids

KEY

- Ubisoft Montpellier
- Éric Chahi



» adventure can be found in *Zombi*, the undead shooter made just across town from the sun-baked residential house that, for many years, housed Ancel and his team.

There's a certain southern French 'je ne sais quoi' that often seeps into Montpellier's work. Even now, a *Rayman* game typically starts with the hero snoozing away in a hammock or propped against a mossy tree, the sound of his snoring irritating his enemies. The walls of the studio's villa kept projects small while other Ubisoft teams grew large and anonymous; when *Another World* creator Éric Chahi was given the choice of Ubisoft offices to work on a spiritual successor to *Populous*, he picked Montpellier over Paris.

DUST MATES

Though Chahi has his own voice, his collaboration with Montpellier reinforced its regular themes. In *From Dust*, you spread the reach of nature across a barren land, harnessing lava and water to grow vegetation. You control the trees and the seas by learning their essential melodies; as the game puts it "when the music fluctuates, so do the elements, because all is movement and music is the reflection of this movement".

It's easy to see Montpellier as Ubisoft's whimsical oddball child, allowed to think small while other studios make the money. But its technology has fuelled the empire. *Beyond Good & Evil*'s Jade engine powered the *Prince of Persia* series, while the studio's facial animation showed up in *Assassin's Creed*, and *Rayman*'s UbiArt Framework kicked off the publisher's faux-indie boom with *Child of Light* and *Valiant Hearts*.

For *Beyond Good & Evil 2*, the tech is more ambitious than ever – said to cover an entire solar system – and some have wondered whether Montpellier's googly eyes could be bigger than its stomach. More concerning was



the report last year from French newspaper *Libération*, in which around 15 Ubisoft Montpellier employees described Ancel as a "toxic" personality, whose mismanagement led a dozen developers to burn out – accusations which Ancel denies. After an investigation, Ubisoft CEO Yves Guillemot

reportedly decided to "renew his trust" towards Ancel. But the *Rayman* director is no longer working at the studio, having suddenly retired from game development. His next place of employment? A wildlife sanctuary. Who'd of thunk it?

Montpellier has already proved that it can make great games without

Ancel as director. The question is whether its offbeat identity can survive the pressure of becoming the lead studio on what Ubisoft staff ominously refer to as a "AAAA" game. It remains to be seen how much stress this ancient oak can take. ■

Jeremy Peel

ABOVE: "Awight mate? Welcome to Laaahndan!"

MONTPELLIER'S GOOGLY EYES COULD BE BIGGER THAN ITS STOMACH



Imagine a LucasArts adventure where you never get stuck. That's *Valiant Hearts*.

PREVIEW



Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
October 26

DEVELOPER
Eidos Montreal

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

LINK
bit.ly/3ql0mf6

MARVEL'S GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY

Banter, '80s bangers, and not a microtransaction in sight

With the Avengers already doing their thing, Square Enix is giving us another superhero group to muck around with, this time from *Deus Ex* studio Eidos Montreal. These heroes are pretty different from Adam Jensen, however, who you'd never see hanging out with a murderous raccoon. Yes, it's the Guardians of the Galaxy.

A roguish band of space adventurers might sound like a good fit for yet another co-op live service affair, like *Marvel's Avengers*, but Eidos Montreal is thankfully sticking to what it knows: a singleplayer game with a narrative bent. It's a linear misadventure that will see you jetting off around the galaxy as Peter Quill, aka Star-Lord.

Senior creative director Jean-François Dugas tells me that playing against expectations was a big "driving force" for the team. Games are increasingly trying to drag us back in with events and season passes and new things to grind, but *Guardians of the Galaxy* isn't looking to swallow up your life. "We weren't looking at trends, to be honest," adds senior gameplay director Patrick Fortier. "When we started sitting down, we were just looking at what do we like to do? What are our strengths with the franchise? How do we give our own unique spin to this?"

Beyond the fact that it's always nice to see a big game that's a traditional singleplayer romp, it also makes a lot

more sense for the story that Eidos Montreal is trying to tell. It's all about the Guardians and their relationships, which would be undermined if you had to spend hours every day queueing for missions with xXIAMGROOTXx.

Senior narrative director Mary Demarle says the "narrative experience" is the heart of the game. "We were able to create, I hope, a very compelling story that has a lot of humour, a lot of excitement, a lot of real emotional moments."

LEADING MAN

Star-Lord being the sole playable character is a surprise, especially since there isn't a Guardian who wouldn't be fun to play with, but after seeing *Guardians of the Galaxy* in action, I think it's the right choice. The core Guardians are all still here, but like the comics and movies, we experience this galaxy full of aliens through the eyes of the everyman, who serves as the group's kinda-leader.

And by making you play only as Star-Lord, says Fortier, Eidos Montreal is able to capture some of the chaos and unpredictability that's key to the

FIRST LOOK

Guardians, "Because you don't control everything." Your buds have some agency, then, and the ability to surprise you. In combat, this means that Drax could get a bit carried away because his blood is up, so you might need to go and save him. But since you're the boss, you still have some control, so you can order one of them to use one of their special abilities when you need it.

Eidos Montreal didn't want to bog the action down with lots of commands and micromanagement, but there's still tactical considerations to make during the heat of battle. As well as having all of Star-Lord's handy gadgets, like his elemental guns and jet boots, you can take advantage of each Guardian's powers to create synergies.

"What is also very key is that there's not one way to solve the problem; there's not only one way to battle those enemies," says Dugas. "You can be really experimental, but the systems are built in such a way that you're being rewarded to remain engaged. So the Guardians by themselves will be autonomous and can have some level of success, but if you're straying too far, eventually they can get in

IT'S ALWAYS NICE TO SEE A BIG GAME THAT'S A TRADITIONAL SINGLEPLAYER ROMP

Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy



➤ trouble, and you're the so-called leader – you need to stay engaged with them.”

AWESOME MIX

The highlight of the brawls I got to watch was Star-Lord's big team-based ultimate ability. You can tell your pals to huddle up, give an inspiring speech, and then bring out your Walkman, blasting some tunes while you blast some aliens.

Fortier notes that music is a big pillar; it's integral to Star-Lord's backstory. “Peter was ripped from his home at an early age, so even symbolically music represents that last tie to Earth and his past and his childhood, so it's meaningful in that way. And then on the Milano you'll have moments where you can pick the music. And we wanted to find a way to integrate it in-game as well.”

The team considered giving you full control over the walkman when you're on-mission, but that seemed too fiddly, especially in a fight. The compromise was to tie it into that specific ability, making for big, dramatic musical moments when the action's at its height.

Star-Lord's obsession with music was a particularly big part of the MCU version of Guardians of the Galaxy, but the game version draws from all sources. It's Eidos Montreal's take on the group, but using characters and story beats fans of the comics and movies will be familiar with. In the case of Star-Lord, the studio really focused on the fact that he's a child of the '80s who never really grew up.

“Once we honed in on that we were able to design the character around that whole feeling of the '80s,” says Demarle, “from his overdo, you know, his hairstyle, to his jacket with all the studs, and even the pins that he's wearing on his jacket are all these old '80s games. It really gave us a way to make this Peter Quill recognisable and yet completely our own.”

The Guardians certainly look the part – and you'll be able to unlock new costumes for them – and from this brief slice, it certainly seems like the team has managed to get the tone and relationships right as well. The game is set a year into their partnership, so they're not quite veterans, but they've already forged some bonds, even through all the bickering.

IT SEEMS LIKE THE TEAM HAS MANAGED TO GET THE TONE AND RELATIONSHIPS RIGHT

ANGER MANAGEMENT

They wouldn't be the Guardians without some beefs. They disagree, fight, and sometimes screw each other over. Expect lots and lots of reactive banter, which you'll hear even more if you spend a bit more time exploring the levels, but there are also some more meaningful conversations that you'll need to have, where you'll get different choices for how to proceed and, of course, have to manage their consequences.

In one sequence, the group needs to get across a chasm, and Drax suggests throwing Rocket across, as the smallest member of the crew. He's not too happy about that. This allows the group to get across, but Rocket is pretty angry about it.

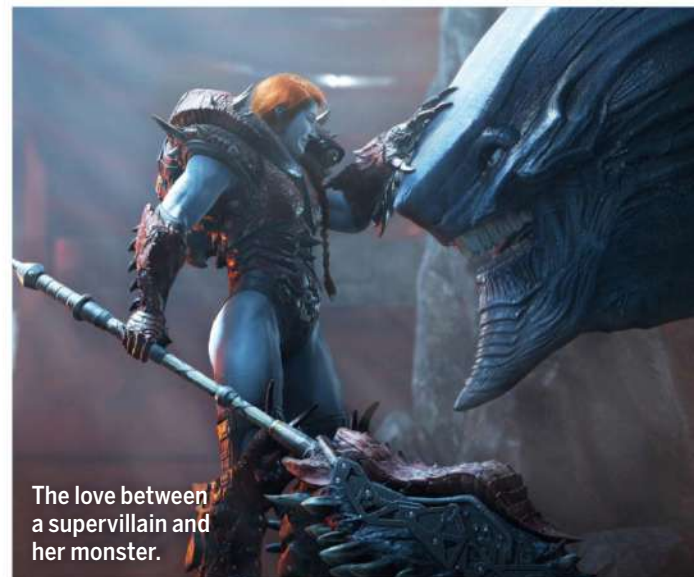
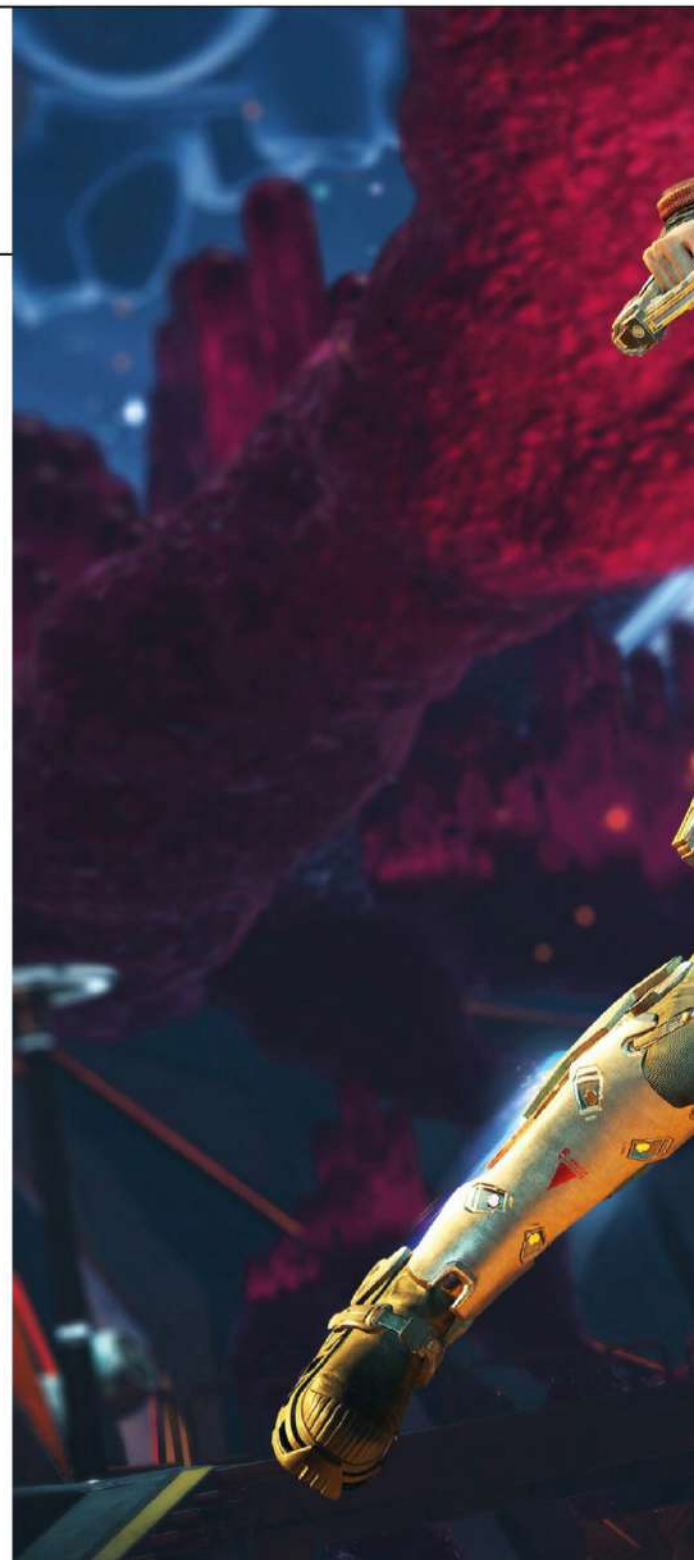
Consequences range from immediate and funny to opening up completely new paths. “We're from Eidos Montreal, so I think it's in our DNA to care about choice and consequences,” says Fortier. “And I think it's pretty unique in this particular space, a narrative action adventure, it's not necessarily something that you'd expect.” Though we did see some of this in Telltale's *Guardians of the Galaxy*, this is a very different kind of game, and the addition of these choices and relationships does seem pretty novel.

While some of the consequences look substantial, the main story will still be broadly the same for everyone (at least in regards to how it starts and ends) but through your choices you'll get a different version of it. What the actual story is remains mysterious. We know the Guardians want to make a buck out of the charmingly named Lady Hellbender, who wants a big alien monster, but of course everything goes wrong and the heroes end up unleashing something unpleasant. Beyond that, the devs are staying schtum.

Thankfully, we won't have to wait very long to find out more. *Guardians of the Galaxy* is due on October 26, so it's just around the corner. Eidos Montreal has been working on it with Marvel for a few years, so it's managed to keep it secret for a while, even if rumours did appear recently. And when you get your hands on the game, you get it all.

“There isn't going to be any DLC for this game,” says Demarle, “there isn't going to be any microtransactions, and that's because, for us, it's very important that on day one, when players get this game, they can have access to everything.” After *Marvel's Avengers*, that is definitely a relief.

Fraser Brown



The love between a supervillain and her monster.

Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy

ABOVE: Quill has guns that shoot different elemental effects, like in the comics.

LEFT: Old craterface here probably just wants to talk.

CORE BLIMEY

Howard also says that *Starfield* will be a slightly more hardcore roleplaying game than recent Bethesda titles, with more options for players to express themselves. Sounds promising after *Fallout*.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
November 11, 2022

DEVELOPER
Bethesda Game Studios

PUBLISHER
Zenimax Media

LINK
beth.games/2SP6iYT

STARFIELD

FIRST
LOOK*Skyrim's* not the limit

Having mastered cheese wheels with *Skyrim*, Bethesda has had to create a new franchise to take its food tech to the next level – and what a detailed sandwich was featured in a recent *Starfield* trailer. It seems emblematic: there's a more grounded, NASA feeling to the technology shown, even if this RPG takes place 300 years into our future. Concept art shows rustic frontiers, gleaming sci-fi cities, and alien environments, in a game that's basically *Skyrim* in space. See that alien mountain? You can probably go there, but you could also follow the main faction – the explorers of Constellation – and unravel the secrets of the universe.

Tom Sykes

FACTION
STATIONS

Todd Howard likens the structure of *Starfield* to *Skyrim*. There will be multiple factions, with the main one being Constellation: a bunch of people who are super keen on exploration.

**ALIEN
NATION**

Not pictured: aliens. Alien races *have* been confirmed, but it's not yet clear whether they will simply appear as NPCs, or as playable alternatives to humans, like the fantasy races of *Skyrim*.

**CREATION
MYTH**

Bethesda hasn't explained how its Creation Engine 2 differs from the long-running Creation Engine powering the likes of *Skyrim* and *Fallout*, but it will make its shiny debut in *Starfield*.

PREVIEW

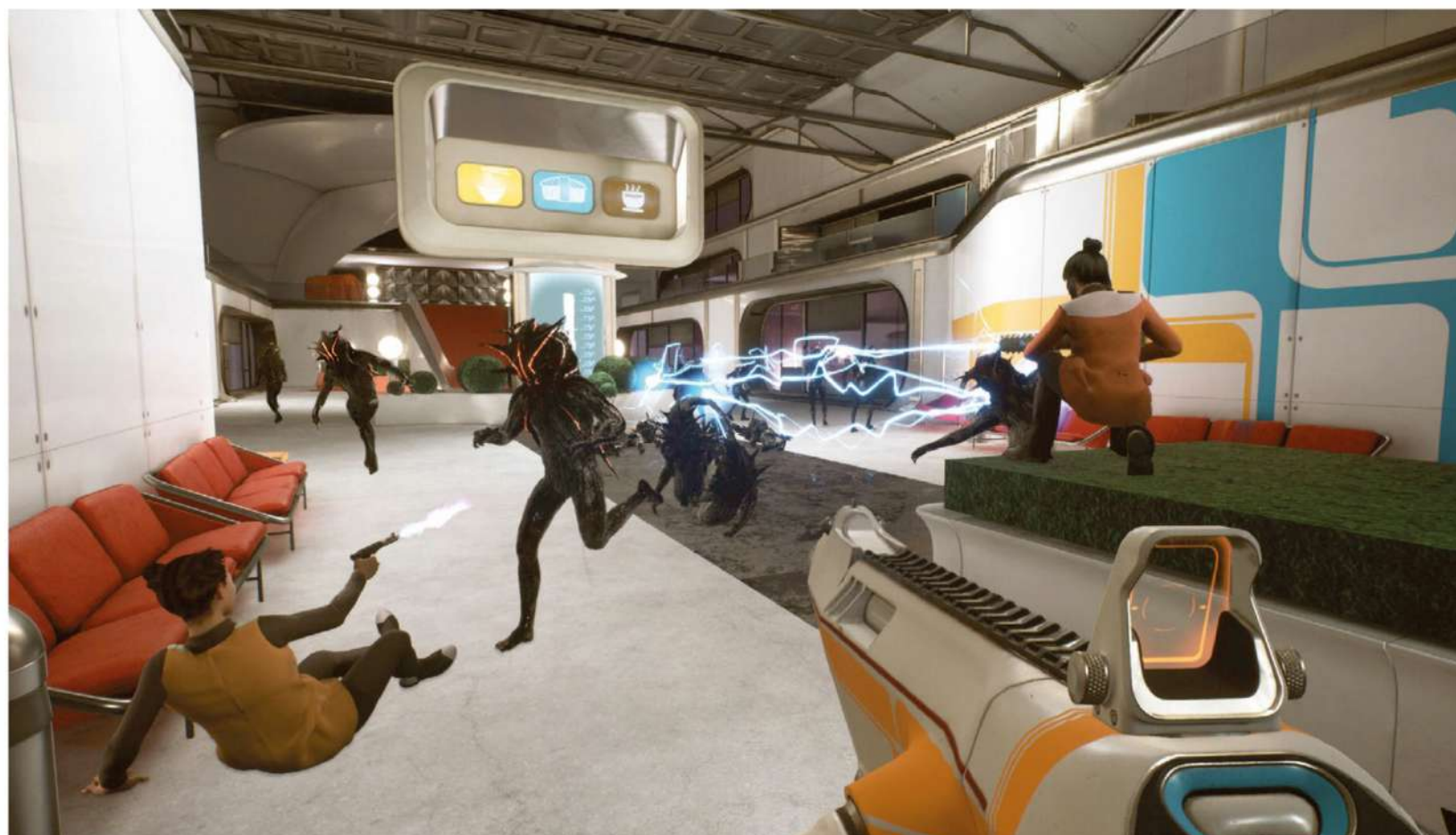
The Anacrusis



ABOVE: The retro sci-fi look certainly stands out.

RIGHT: Shooting bolts of electricity is just cooler than shooting boring old bullets.

FAR RIGHT: The alien designs are a little generic to look at.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Autumn

DEVELOPER
Stray Bombay

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
theanacrusis.com

THE ANACRUSIS

A sci-fi spin on *Left 4 Dead*, from former Valve and Riot developers

What were the keys to *Left 4 Dead*'s long-lasting success? One was how well it worked as a 'hangout game' – a way to catch up with friends over an exploded zombie head or two. Another was its immense modding scene, adding huge longevity and variety to an already super replayable experience. And these are the two pillars of spiritual successor *The Anacrusis*, from former Valve developers, which trades zombies for aliens in a retro sci-fi setting.

"When my co-founder Dr Kimberly Voll and I started talking about this, we were talking about gaming as a social space. And thinking, if you stood back and thought of games that way versus games as an activity, what would you do and how would you approach it?" says Chet Faliszek, who worked at Valve for more than a decade. "I really loved the co-op on *Left 4 Dead* and how people acted together, and we really wanted to capture that and bring that into the modern setting and update a lot of what we learned there and take it to the next place."

So what does that mean? Not just that zombies are passé now, though *The Anacrusis* does ditch them in favour of a horde of vaguely xenomorph-like aliens. But it's the AI behind them Faliszek says is significant. "That's one of the reasons why, for this game in particular, that Kim is the perfect partner," he says. Voll has a PhD in AI, and "the very first code" written for *The Anacrusis* was how its version of the *Left 4 Dead* AI director will work.

Enemies behave in ways guided by what they learned from watching how co-op players act. That also informed the new 'special infected' equivalents, like an alien called The Spawner that will continue creating small turret enemies that attack you until The Spawner's killed. The Flasher mucks with your vision and senses. The Brute is, much like *Left 4 Dead*'s Tank, a big bruiser. They don't sound revolutionary, but the promise is that the AI driver will know when to bring all these baddies to bear to split up a group.

What I'm most interested in are the weapons of *The Anacrusis*' sci-fi setting. In early footage you can see one player throwing a stasis grenade, while another player chucks some sort of black hole bomb that sucks a bunch of aliens into a gravity well. The main gun featured in most of the video looks somewhat like a bland pea shooter (don't all starting weapons?), but there's also an arc rifle that sends tendrils of electricity through multiple aliens, so I'm hopeful there's more fun designs like that planned for the final game. Faliszek says to expect more added to the game over time, too – one of the benefits of sci-fi is that it opens up the possibilities for a whole world of wild and wacky weapon designs.

FIRST
LOOK

AI PATHING

As with *Left 4 Dead*, *The Anacrusis* will have its stages divided up into episodes, and the levels themselves won't change, though the placement of items and enemies will. Dr Voll designed tools to make it especially easy to populate levels and to automatically determine the AI's pathing around geometry, something that Faliszek says will be available to modders as well. The game is being designed to be moddable on day one of release, currently scheduled for this autumn.

It's a crowded genre out there these days – from existing hits like *Deep Rock Galactic* and *Vermintide*, to other upcoming titles such as *Darktide* and *Back 4 Blood*, *The Anacrusis* has a lot to prove if it wants to stand out. But with a unique philosophy and a legendary Valve developer behind it, I'm convinced this is a co-op shooter you need to keep your eye on this year.

Wes Fenlon

THE ANACRUSIS WILL HAVE ITS STAGES DIVIDED UP INTO EPISODES



PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Tom Sykes



NEW
INFO

ELDEN RING

From's *Souls* successor is ringing in the changes

RELEASE
January 2022

DEVELOPER
From Software

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco

LINK
bit.ly/3yqH5mu

As with every recent From Software game, *Elden Ring* will be a mixture of the familiar and the different, with some changes to *Souls* combat

and world design. It's set in an open world, though don't expect traditional RPG towns – there are six main areas complete with dungeons and bosses. There is stealth, but there are exciting new options in

combat, including skills you can freely swap between weapons. Mounted combat's on offer too. Speaking of which: in the trailer your horse does a double-jump! Metal!



Battlefield 2042

RELEASED October | **DEVELOPER** DICE

The next *Battlefield* is going back... to the future, although it's a game that seems to be harkening back to its past. There's no single-player campaign in 2042 and no battle royale, but the traditional 64-player count has been upped to a whopping 128. It's making big changes to the series by replacing classes with specialists: defined characters a la *Rainbow Six Siege*. Each comes equipped with a nifty gadget, such as a turret, a grappling hook, or a robot dog. Two new modes have been teased: one a 'love letter' to fans, while the other is a squad-focused mode named Hazard Zone.



STALKER 2

RELEASED April 2022 | **DEVELOPER** GSC Game World

The sequel to the post-apocalyptic FPS is *finally* coming, and it's making all the right noises. Literally. The familiar PDA jingle was knowingly inserted into a recent trailer, as if to reassure us this is the *STALKER* we know and love. We'll once again claim artefacts from invisible anomalies by chucking screws around, while the horrific bloodsucker monster has returned to torment us anew. But the Zone has seen some changes. It's now fully open world, rather than a series of linked areas, while GSC says its famed A-Life AI simulation has been enhanced. Mod support is planned for the game as well.



Age of Empires IV

RELEASED October | **DEVELOPER** Relic Entertainment

In resurrecting *Age of Empires*, Microsoft has passed the baton to Relic, which is aiming to bring the classic RTS into the modern day. Well, I say modern-day, but of course *IV* will be barrelling through history, in four campaigns set over lengthy spans of time. For example, the English campaign will explore the whole Norman conquest, beginning with William the Conqueror and ending with the Magna Carta. As for civilisations, there will be eight at launch: the English, French, Chinese, Mongols, Rus, Holy Roman Empire, Delhi Sultanate, and Abbasid Dynasty.



Endless Dungeon

RELEASED TBC | DEVELOPER Amplitude Studios

Although the studio is currently a bit preoccupied with the entirety of human history in its latest 4X, *Humankind*, Amplitude hasn't left its *Endless* series in the dust. *Endless Dungeon* is the spiritual successor to tower defence roguelike *Dungeon of the Endless*, but with its crunchy pixel art swapped for expressive 3D models, and with heroes that you'll now directly control. Rather than trying to survive in an ancient facility on the planet of Auriga, you'll be fighting waves of enemies as you explore a seemingly abandoned space station, either online or alone with AI pals.



Forza Horizon 5

RELEASED November | DEVELOPER Playground Games

UK readers may be sick of Blighty, after being confined here for so long, so let's have a holiday in *Forza Horizon 5*. It's heading to Mexico, which Playground Games describes as the series' most diverse location yet. It's hard to argue with that, given the jungle, desert, coastal, and volcanic areas showcased in a recent trailer. The new Expeditions event will offer a guided tour through the world, which is a smart idea given we're generally hurtling through it at breakneck speed. If that's not enough, we'll be able to create our own events, using a toolset based on internal development tools.



A Plague Tale: Requiem

RELEASED 2022 | DEVELOPER Asobo Studio

Rat swarms are back (er, great) in *A Plague Tale* sequel *Requiem*, which will return us to its bleak medieval world. Siblings Amicia and Hugo look a little older, and a sunny coastal environment has been shown off, but don't expect to be given a holiday from all the ratty horror. You'll have to "sacrifice your innocence" as you try to escape a "terrifying curse", and that's about all we know about this follow-up to the cinematic stealth game. We found its stealthy action a bit repetitive compared to the impressive world and story, so let's hope there's more variety this time around.

REDFALL

Left 4 Dead
with vampires

Arkane does vampires with the out-of-nowhere *Redfall*, which is a very Arkane take on *Left 4 Dead*. Each of the four vamp-battling heroes has their own supernatural or high-tech skills. That means creative use of abilities as you explore the town of Redfall, which is awash with superpowered vampires after some scientists made a boo-boo in a nearby lab. Another way it differs from *Left 4 Dead* is that *Redfall* will be open world – a world that will change in mysterious ways from one playthrough to the next.



RELEASE
Summer 2022

DEVELOPER
Arkane Austin

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

LINK
beth.games/3dKKZi6

FIRST
LOOK

PREVIEW

Terra Nil



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC

DEVELOPER
Free Lives

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

LINK
bit.ly/3xwAlhi

TERRA NIL

An eco-friendly antidote to planet-stripping sims

In traditional city-builders and factory sims, your role is to extract whatever you need from the world around you, no matter the environmental cost. *Terra Nil* flips that idea on its head, asking what happens once every last seam has been mined, tree has been felled, and pre-fab mega-factory has been packed away.

Terra Nil's demo begins overlooking a barren wasteland. The only features that mark the empty landscape other than the occasional rocky outcropping are just further evidence of the damage that's been wrought upon the world; single desiccated pines or ancient, dried-up riverbeds. The rewilding process begins by cleaning the soil of toxins and watering the ground beneath, and as each relevant structure is dropped into place, a flash of colour returns to another section of the world.

Water flows down empty wadis, fertilising the banks on either side of the recreated rivers and weaving a patchwork of green and blue throughout the map. Irrigators flood the map with vegetation, breathing new life into vast swathes of the wasteland. Each refreshed tile offers resources to spend on more structures, and proper planning leads to a cascading effect as rewilded areas begin to connect together.

The first phase of the process is perhaps the most impressive, but it's also the least complex, a relatively simple step-by-step process. Once you've

brought the first signs of life back to the wasteland, your next goal is to create distinct biomes, adapting the structures you've already placed to transform the landscape further. Irrigators placed near sources of water can be adapted into gently-turning waterwheels, flooding the plains nearby to form wetlands, while installing beehives gives life to lush wildflower meadows.

As new habitats form across the map, life starts to return to the world. Deer tread tentatively out of the forests while flocks of birds wheel overhead. It's a simplistic touch, but just another way in which *Terra Nil* highlights the importance of your intervention far better than the genres it's attempting to pastiche.

REIGN OF TERRA

With the natural environment restored, it's time to pack up. Adopting a stiff 'leave no trace' approach, every structure and tool you've used to replenish the world around you must be methodically recycled, the most effective showcase of the subtle puzzle that underscores *Terra Nil*. Creating certain biomes requires some specific tasks to be carried out in order. A forest, for example, can only be built from the ashes of a building that's destroyed during a controlled burn, an expensive and potentially destructive process that can quickly undo your work elsewhere on the map. Similarly, scrubbing the world clean of the mark you've left upon it must be done in order, each building dismantled at the right time to ensure an entirely unspoiled wilderness.

Terra Nil's naturalistic soundtrack and colour scheme might offer a calm and therapeutic gameplay experience, but developer Free Lives makes no attempt to disguise its message of our role in the climate disaster and the responsibility we have to our planet. In a genre built around exploitation, it's a doubly effective subversion of the norm, encouraging you to bask in its wholesome presentation while shining a light on the barbarity of humanity's actions. Whether the full game can incorporate enough new ideas to keep that subversion compelling remains to be seen, but the opening level is a fascinating showcase in its own right.

Ali Jones



Irrigators spread water and seeds across the map.



AS NEW HABITATS FORM ACROSS THE MAP, LIFE STARTS TO RETURN TO THE WORLD



ABOVE: Barren wastelands give way to diverse landscapes.

LEFT: Controlled burns are needed to create forests.

PREVIEW

Hot Wheels Unleashed



LAP TIME
02:09.131

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
September 27

DEVELOPER
Milestone

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
hotwheelsunleashed.com

HOT WHEELS UNLEASHED

Hands-on with Milestone's licensed loop-de-loop-'em-up

Games like *Hot Wheels Unleashed* were abundant in PC gaming's beige era. You'd pop a demo disc into your Voodoo 2 tower and find an *Airfix Dogfighter* or a *ReVolt*, in which toys raced across suburban bedrooms. They were never going to hold your attention like *Richard Burns Rally*, but it was an afternoon of giggles.

Enter Milestone's straightforward Hot Wheels racer. Once again a magical and unknown force has imbued collectible toys with sentience – and also rather thoughtfully arranged a number of tracks around college campuses and skateparks – and your mission is to race one of those toys to victory.

The full release will include a track builder and 12-player online multiplayer, but for this preview, simple quick races were my main event. They walk a line between the exuberant loop-de-looping you'd expect from the official toy licence it carries and a sterner, more straight-laced style. It's *Trackmania* without the restarts. *Mario Kart*, but with straight-line braking. A world of gravity-defying tracks that imply arcade forgiveness and then chuck you miles away from the circuit.

It's a bit frustrating, because even after several hours of racing on it, I'm still not totally sure what *Hot Wheels Unleashed* wants from me. Is it a game about powersliding around every corner, or about learning the tracks and finding braking points? It's a mystery.

I'M STILL NOT TOTALLY SURE WHAT HOT WHEELS UNLEASHED WANTS FROM ME

HEAT WAVE

All tracks include acceleration strips: blue spots that charge your boost and pink spots that boost you instantly. On paper, there's an advantage to weaving lines that take you through as many of these as possible, but often they fling you at disadvantageous trajectories towards the next section of track.

The most effective way to approach a race, then, is to know its undulations and traps before the green light and tip-toe around them, coasting through some corners, powersliding very rarely, and boosting only when you're damn sure the track's straight for the next five seconds. It isn't unsatisfying, it's just not what the pedal-to-the-diecast-metal trailer implies.

Ostensibly, different circuits will focus on various disciplines, like drifting or navigating environmental hazards (such as the confounded spider that spat its web at me at point-blank range on the final lap and cost me 11 positions). But after a few races, the distinction becomes unclear.

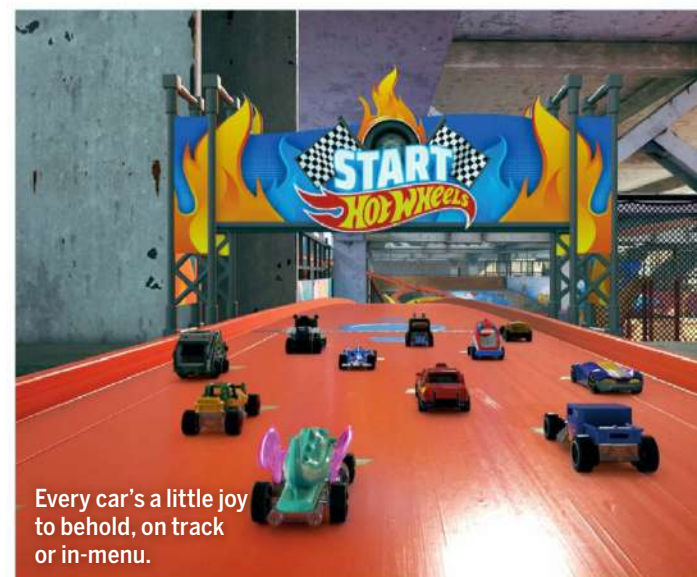
The vehicles, however, are wonderfully distinct. Milestone nails the cuteness of its miniatures, the sparkle of their various paint jobs, and even the scratches across their bodies. They also handle wildly differently. There are a couple of different boost styles – a series of bursts or a long continuous release – and some cars offer a button-bashing minigame on the starting grid to nail a quick start. This being the modern era, cars are arranged into colour-coded rarity tiers and I expect acquisition of top-tier vehicles will account for much of the long-game draw.

The variation in their handling is also a factor in why I haven't yet sussed this game's handling. The Hot Wheels High school bus and Night Shifter hot rod require completely different touches to convince them round corners, much to the game's credit. Success looks like it'll be earned by spending time with one vehicle and figuring out its behaviour.

It's unlikely *Hot Wheels Unleashed* will keep its hooks in me for months, but it should be good for a quick thrill. There's a lot to be said for racing you can access a few seconds after hitting 'play' on Steam in the games-as-a-service age, and the toy car collection adds to the long-term draw.

Phil Iwaniuk

PLAYED IT



Every car's a little joy to behold, on track or in-menu.



ABOVE: Don't tell the insurance company I drove my stegosaurus car along this road.

LEFT: Told you not to get caught in the goo. Now look – overtaken by a garbage truck.

EARLY ACCESS PREVIEW

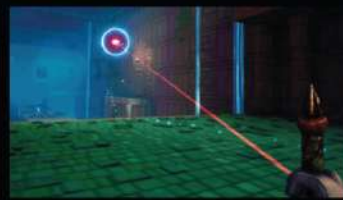
Phantom Abyss



ABOVE: Hold back a bit so you can watch and learn.

RIGHT: With so many options, it's sometimes better to go with gut instinct.





NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£19.50

DEVELOPER
Team WIBY

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

LINK
phantomabyss.com

PHANTOM ABYSS

Tomb-raiding has never been this fun (or treacherous)

This is a whip-smart platformer about escaping an underground prison, your key to freedom lying in the hands of a god who demands relics. To get your mitts on these items, you'll need to traverse four floors of a procedurally-generated temple filled with horrible death traps.

Falling rocks, giant swinging hammers, hidden spikes, moving stone floors, bottomless chasms – all the classic booby traps are here and ready to take you out. Thankfully, you'll be joined by the ghosts of up to 20 other players who have all previously died in the temple you're attempting to complete.

This ghost system is what makes *Phantom Abyss* unique. Watching how previous players approach each trap lets you see which route works best, and which will leave you splattered in a bloody mess. Seeing ghosts get obliterated by increasingly lethal traps is tense, but it's also exciting to learn from their footwork. If you die, you leave your own phantom in that same temple – it's nice to know that all the times I've been sliced, diced, crushed, bludgeoned, and impaled will help someone else get that little bit further in the game.

As you complete each floor, things begin to get more frenzied. Each run not only has traps, but a guardian who is pretty pissed off that you're scuttling around their temple. Sidestepping timed spikes is easy enough, but not when you have a giant eyeball-firing lasers at you.

TEMPLE RUN

Phantom Abyss gives you three lives per run, giving you room for error, but there's something about wanting to elegantly breeze through a deadly room that makes you into a risk-taker. Sure, I could stop and wait for the incredibly large hammer to swing out of the way, but I could also slide along the floor underneath it. It's risky, but wouldn't it look cool as hell?

The pleasingly fluid controls get you into that cocky, daredevil mindset. Dodging and diving through the world's most lethal obstacle course has its own thrills, but the addition of a whip takes the action to another level, literally. It essentially acts like a grappling hook, letting you climb up high ledges, leap over big gaps, get out of sticky situations. The number of times I've fallen into a chasm only to grab a ledge with my whip and hoist myself back up is too many to count. It's incredibly easy to use and gives your character a sense of agility. The result is movement that flows perfectly, helping to mitigate the frustration of failure.

There are several whips to choose from before you embark on your treacherous trip, each one with a fancy ability attached to it. One might give you the ability to double jump or another may grant you two extra heart containers. They certainly help you navigate chambers, but if you die down there, your whip is lost too. That is, until a player completes the temple, then everyone gets their lost loot back. If you're skilled enough to survive each floor and grab the relic at the end, that dungeon is sealed off forever.

The *Phantom Abyss* Steam page says that the game will be in Early Access for at least a year, and Team WIBY will be working on adding new features throughout that time. I'm looking forward to these updates, as some of the temple layouts are getting a little repetitive. But there's just enough variety to keep it from getting tedious, and having the whip always makes each run more interesting. *Phantom Abyss* is the whip-based parkour platformer we've all been waiting years for – Bethesda had better be taking notes for its upcoming *Indiana Jones* game, that's for sure.

Rebecca Watts

PLAYED IT



Keeping up with the ghost pack can be stressful.

AS YOU COMPLETE EACH FLOOR, THINGS BEGIN TO GET MORE FRENZIED

Encased



NEED TO KNOW

EXPET TO PAY
£24

DEVELOPER
Dark Crystal Games

PUBLISHER
Prime Matter

LINK
darkcrystalgames.com

ENCASED

Survival in this mysterious dome is no picnic

Presumably the title 'Endomed' was already taken, as *Encased* takes place under, and in the general area of, such a hemispherical structure. Recalling the Stephen King novel *Under the Dome*, and of course *The Simpsons Movie*, the game also gets in an early reference to *Roadside Picnic*, the novel that inspired *STALKER*.

Unlike the *Marked One's* adventure, this isn't an FPS but a top-down RPG, and there's more *Fallout* than fallout about it. Although there is a bit of that too. The dome is an artefact left behind by a lost civilisation, filled with items worth studying but dangerous enough that prisoners are being sent in as unskilled labour. This is where I find myself after leaving the character creator, in handcuffs at the bottom of the social order.

Something awful is going on at Research Station Nashville, so naturally this is where I get sent. Nothing can escape the dome, which, being filled with criminals, is a pretty dangerous place, so everyone goes armed. Even more dangerous are patches of radiation, and the 'anomalies' that twist reality. Much of the environment can hurt you, and therefore it's an enormous relief, a few hours in, to come across a suit of powered armour and a shotgun. How very *Fallout*.

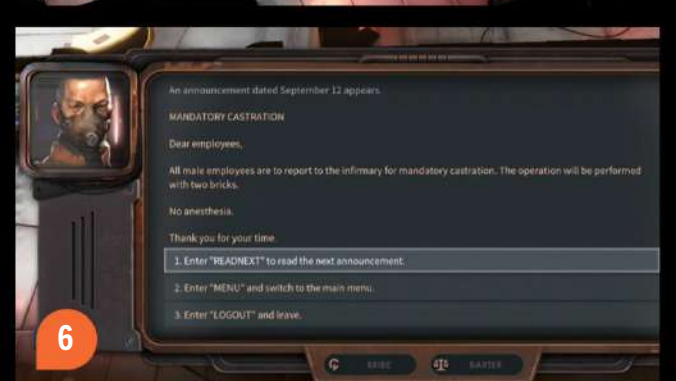
So far, *Encased* has only made my head explode once – when I was in prison – but also displayed enough hooks in its storyline to well and truly reel me in.

Ian Evenden

SOMETHING AWFUL IS GOING ON AT RESEARCH STATION NASHVILLE

- 1 Anomalies, like these ones from a training room, give off radiation damage if you get close. They can be defused by throwing a metal bolt into them, but it doesn't last for long and makes picking your way through some areas very stressful.
- 2 The game slips into a turn-based mode once combat is initiated. Height makes a big difference – by hiding on a rooftop I was able to chip away at these turrets while their machine gun barrages mostly missed.
- 3 My orange suit marks me out as a prisoner. My friend's blue suit means she's from the mechanic class. Black suits designate soldiers, silver ones are bureaucrats, white are scientists, and anyone without any clothes is best left alone.
- 4 One of the first items you get is a scanner. The information it gleans not only gives you XP points, but also feeds into a currency system where you exchange what you've learned for items and weaponry.
- 5 This armoured suit is very familiar. You can't sit down while wearing it, and having just picked up a load of guns I'm suspicious about how easily I acquired it, but whatever's hiding in the vents – we can hear its footsteps – had better watch out.
- 6 There's a lot of reading to do, but that doesn't matter as it's all useful. The dialogue window takes up a lot of the screen, and there's a 'story' window that can be popped out to recap what's been said. Charisma and bribery are important factors too.





Graven



ABOVE: Thanks, blacksmith! But why is your shop full of weapons that aren't for sale?

RIGHT: Ah, the sewers. Home of the starting RPG character since time immemorial.





NEED TO KNOW

EXPET TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Slipgate Ironworks

PUBLISHER
3D Realms

LINK
graven.game

GRAVEN

Deep in the sewers something is stirring... and it smells like pixels

Wibbly wobbly wibbly wobbly. You have entered a time warp. It's 1998, and you're the proud owner of a Pentium II PC with 64MB of RAM and maybe a 3Dfx Voodoo 2 if you have rich parents. What do you play? *Hexen II*. All day long!

Coming back to the present, and *Graven* is a spiritual successor to *Hexen II*, which was, confusingly, the third game in a series, which means *Graven* is *Heretic IV*. Or something like that. The great year of 1998 is everywhere in the graphics, and the game looks like a lost expansion pack to *Daggerfall* but with a modern, minimalist HUD. There's clearly some modern Unreal technology at work rather than the *Doom* engine, as textures are crisply pixelated all the way up to 4K rather than the horrific mess that we used to call 'good graphics' back then (the options screen includes a '3Dfx Mode' for those who like a good smear of Vaseline across their screens). This is the way games at the time looked in our heads, the reality was much worse.

A resurrected game from a resurrected publisher (3D Realms, you'll no doubt recall, began life in 1987 as Apogee, published *Commander Keen*, *Duke Nukem*, and *Wolfenstein 3D*, then changed its name in 1996 and went through something of a difficult period before being bought out by Danish investors in 2014 and releasing the similarly retro *Ion Fury* and *Wrath*), you'll fight plenty of resurrected enemies. A

PLAYED
IT

plague has come to the town of Cruxfirth and you, an exiled priest with just a stick to his name, seem to be the only one willing to hack your way through the zombies and monsters to help, and get revenge on your fellow cultists.

That stick turns out to be an excellent weapon, bludgeoning the undead in the game's first section that, in time-honoured style, sees you descend to the sewers. There's no rat infestation to tackle, but piles of corpses that are blocking the usual flow of waste. Your first brush with the game's magic system is a puzzling one – the fire spell you pick up won't actually hurt the undead. No turning zombies into shambling human torches here, spells only affect inanimate objects, so you'll need to find an explosive barrel (red, naturally) to bury in the corpse pile, then set that alight.

GRAVE DANGER

There's a hint in the patch notes that this might change, but we rather like the way it nudges you toward environmental kills rather than the old mystical machine-gun. This will only work, however, if multiple opportunities are baked into the environment. Being able to set our sword on fire before laying waste, or pouring a fiery trail of oil that the mindless hordes can wander into, would be supremely satisfying, especially as levels tend toward the dark and dismal. As it is, laying in wait for enough zombies to gather near a barrel is as good as it gets. We do like the way you wander around with your spellbook open in front of you, though, and look forward to collecting more spells.

Soon you'll pick up a sword and a crossbow, and strike out of the hub town into the infested countryside on missions for the local authorities.

Problems we encountered – and we should expect this from Early Access releases – include being one-hit killed from behind by something we didn't see, and a zombie becoming stuck in a door making it easy prey. These are tiny niggles, however, and do little to dampen our enthusiasm for the modern-retro-throwback immersive first-person exploration action sim. Now, let's do the time warp again.

Ian Evenden



Woof. Barky woof?
Awoooo! Bow wow wow.
Ruff. Grrr. Woof.

YOUR FIRST BRUSH WITH THE MAGIC SYSTEM IS A PUZZLING ONE

COMPANY OF HEROES 3 is coming
to wake up the RTS genre.

by Fraser Brown

SHOCK

& AWE

COVER FEATURE

Company of Heroes 3



his Italian airbase has turned into Hell. The seared, metal carcass of a plane dominates one of the airstrips, surrounded by craters and puddles of blood. The hangars are now just skeletons, and next to them screaming men dance as they burn. There's so much shouting, with soldiers yelling orders and warnings as they move between fleeting cover. Then, a rocket-propelled grenade, and the soldiers are gone. And through it all I have this inappropriately goofy grin on my face because, finally, I'm playing *Company of Heroes 3*.

The scene, my first fight in the campaign, is the *Company of Heroes* I remember, but with the intensity dialled way up. There's more destruction and noise and chaos, and the busyness of the battlefield speaks to the long list of new tools and units that have been flung into the meat grinder.

Among the headline attractions jockeying for position are a pair of large, dynamic campaigns set in Italy and North Africa; the ability to control the ground, air, and naval forces of both the US and UK, in tandem; an entirely optional tactical

pause system, just for singleplayer; and the promise of a huge pile of customisation that will be like catnip for loadout tinkerers. It has the immense scale of a *Total War* game, complemented by Relic's experience with designing more bespoke, linear strategy games.

TEAM UP

It's the largest and most ambitious game Relic has put together, and it's been in the works for a while. Along with a scale that evokes *Total War*, the team's been inspired by another fellow Sega developer, Amplitude, borrowing its focus on the community. "They're amazing at working with players," says executive producer David Littman. "We're taking the same technology that they use, Games2Gether, and we've been using that with a private community council. So we've had a 70-player council for over three years now. And they've been playing the game for three years." These players are one of the reasons why *Company of Heroes 3* is set in Italy and North Africa – it was initially going to be in the Pacific theatre – so Relic's been getting feedback from the people who play *Company of Heroes* the most right from the beginning.

In this early build, the campaign begins in medias res, following the arrival of US and UK forces in Italy. There's already been some fighting, and I'm given one of three different approaches to select, determining what forces I get to control at the start. I have to begin in Naples, but eventually there will be other choices for starting locations. I want all the toys, naturally, so I go for the option that lets me command a mix of US and UK forces. I've got one big goal:



take the indomitable Monte Cassino, opening up a way to Rome. First, though, lots of dramatic battles.

While Relic has dabbled in dynamic campaigns before, it played second fiddle to the RTS action – not so in *Company of Heroes 3*. Both layers share the spotlight and are fundamentally interconnected. What you can do in the RTS layer can be

BRICK BY BRICK *How destruction transforms a map*



BEFORE

You've got a nice little town here, nestled in the idyllic countryside. It'd sure be a shame if something were to happen to it. Something like a pitched battle happening in the middle of it, for example.



DURING

It still looks nice if you enjoy dynamic destruction. Shells leave holes in roofs, bullets demolish buildings, and vehicles get consumed by fire. Truly explosive sound design is the icing on the traumatic cake.



AFTER

Smoke blots out the sun, vehicles and soldiers have been replaced by craters, and it's devoid of life. The collapsed buildings and blackened hills tell the story of the fight and what caused the destruction.



THE LARGEST AND MOST AMBITIOUS GAME RELIC HAS PUT TOGETHER



replicated in the turn-based campaign, whether it's bombarding the enemy with artillery strikes or plonking down some sneaky mines to scupper troop movement.

This 'holistic loop' is one of the main pillars of *Company of Heroes 3* and makes this undeniably complex game feel significantly more intuitive. There's a level of consistency and permanence that

even *Total War* hasn't achieved, and while Littman apologetically explains that the connection between the campaign and missions "simply isn't there yet", I think he's being humble. Sure, there are still gaps, and some features not working quite like I expected, but broadly this is already a game where the relationships between the systems are very strong and very apparent. ➤

ABOVE: Time to cook some German cuisine.

LEFT: My love of explosions means I didn't try much stealth.





**COMPANIES ARE YOUR PRIMARY
UNITS THAT YOU'LL USE TO ENGAGE
THE ENEMY IN REAL-TIME BATTLES**



TANKS A LOT

Personalise your engines of destruction



1 Nothing says "we're the baddies" like a wee skull on your tank. Thanks for keeping it simple, Nazis.



2 This tank looks just like me the first time I went roller skating, though I didn't use quite as many sandbags.



3 That flag is going to get so muddy. Maybe this is actually an act of rebellion, like burning a flag. Good for you, crew!



4 I've been saving the best for last. Is it a bush? Is it a tank? Next time you're in the woods, keep your eyes open.

TOURIST TRAP

My army is hanging around Naples, with the sprawling Italian countryside stretched out before them. It's a chunky map, but only a small slice of the full Italian campaign that we'll get to play, along with its North African counterpart, at launch. Each discrete bit of territory offers something, whether it's more resources, another link in the supply chain, or access to air and naval

forces. You don't need to take every town in Italy, but I quickly found myself being seduced by the promise of total conquest and all the goodies that come with it.

It's a fetching map, too, with lots of little cosmetic flourishes, like Vesuvius standing next to Pompeii, huge and menacing, or the striking Monte Cassino, which looks lovely even when it's surrounded by barricades, tanks, and AA guns. But



Relic's also built it with an eye towards logistics and authenticity.

"It's got that Mediterranean palette, but we're also spending a lot of time looking at the construction of each of the territories," says lead campaign designer Andrew Deneault. "We've looked at old World War II maps of rail assessments done by the Royal Engineers. So where were the rail lines? Where were the roads? Which roads were functional? As we're building the map, we're taking note of which highways the Allies used that were serviceable for tanks and things like that, which ones had hard surfaces and which ones were dirt tracks. So there's a lot of thought, a lot of love, a lot of attention being given to the map, I think mechanically as well as from the presentation layer."

FLIGHT DELAYED

After spending a bit of time admiring Italy, I get back to the war. My first target is the nearest airbase, giving me access to handy things like aerial reconnaissance and paratrooper

drops, which will come in handy in both the campaign map and missions. Before storming the airbase, however, I have to decide my approach.

I've got several companies and detachments at my disposal, and how I combine them will have a big impact on the battle ahead. Companies are your primary units that you'll use to engage the enemy in real-time battles, running the gamut from American airborne units to devastating Indian artillery. Across the war, they get points that can be spent on a variety of upgrades and specialisation options. They're backed up by detachments, which can still march across the map on their own, taking territory and getting into turn-based fights. They can't actually instigate real-time battles on their own, however, but if they are near or attached to a company when one starts, they can provide a range of benefits.

Being a cautious commander, I decide to bring a medical detachment with me. On the campaign map, this detachment has a healing ability, and in missions this translates to a very helpful little truck that passively heals any troops standing near it. The truck can be destroyed, of course, and I turn protecting it into a personal side mission. Battles also conjure up explicit optional objectives, like finding intel or finding and taking out a specific enemy.

The medical truck proves to be a significant boon, given that it's been a while since I played *Company of Heroes*. As handy as it is, though, it pales in comparison to the tactical pause feature. My reflexes ain't what

they used to be, so the ability to pause the action at any time to issue and queue commands is a genuine lifesaver, especially when I split my forces up and find myself managing multiple fights.

EVERYONE FREEZE

It was introduced to make *Company of Heroes 3* more accessible to players of all skill levels without removing the complexity and frenetic fights the series is known for, but I think even experienced RTS players will find it useful. "Something I like about the tactical pause is that it's a different kind of payoff, queuing up a number of orders and then seeing them fulfilled," says Deneault. "Taking a piece of territory, using a grenade, pinning the target, flanking, breaching a structure – you can set up some of those more advanced inputs, and in a way that, after you unpause, you can watch it unfold and see if it works. And if it does, there's a great payoff there."

My first *Company of Heroes 3* mission is a thrill – a dramatic battle lit up by countless fires and explosions, courtesy of the airbase's many fuel-filled barrels. At one point, I have to charge across a mostly empty runway, using the occasional ditch to hide my troops, and when one isn't available, my poor medical truck. In the north, by the hangars, other soldiers duke it out with entrenched Nazis, as buildings are blown to smithereens. They get pinned down by a sniper in a tower, but smoke grenades and rockets make short work of it. Amid the fracas, I'm plonking down new

ABOVE: It's OK – the building deserved it.



There's no time for sunbathing today, lads.

COVER FEATURE

Company of Heroes 3

☛ buildings near my HQ, recruiting units and upgrading my existing ones as they rank up. When my engineers get flamethrowers, that's when we really start cooking. There's so much going on that I forget all about the intel, but I still manage to take the airbase, giving me another tool to make my march north, to Monte Cassino, just a little bit easier.

The level of destruction has always been one of *Company of Heroes*' most memorable traits, so naturally Relic has given the system a lot of attention. Art director Tristan Brett and his team have worked tirelessly to create gorgeous Italian towns and villages, all so they can be mercilessly destroyed. The destruction system starts with construction, he tells me. "So we build all the internal framework of the houses, the tiles and everything are really built, so they act like the proper material and slide off the framework. So a lot of thought went into how we build the structures, before we talk about how to break them." I'll admit I do feel a little bit guilty after destroying them all. But it's just so satisfying.

FALLING APART

Every projectile feels tangible and deadly when it's pounding walls to dust, and there's a grim beauty to all the devastation. Sometimes it feels like you're building a warzone rather than destroying a town. And objects

don't just have two states – they aren't simply standing or destroyed. The system is gradual and modular, telling the story of how things were blown up, whether it's a building, a tank, or a lovely garden. There have also been practical improvements, so fallen masonry can now be used as cover, and if troops are underneath when it's falling they might get crushed. If the thought of all these demolished buildings is making you feel sad, you can mitigate some of the destruction by using the new breach system to get enemies out of buildings instead of levelling them. Breaching troops will toss in a grenade and rush the enemy, or better yet, fill the interior with fire from a flamethrower. Enemies will try to flee, but that's why you stick some guys out back.

Emboldened by my first victory, I step into my second fight, a random skirmish, with a confident swagger. My arse gets thoroughly kicked. If this had been *Company of Heroes 1* or *2*, that would have been it for me, but in this World War II sandbox I have to live with my failure. Battle outcomes aren't black and white, either. While my company takes some damage, it survives, and the enemy gains no ground. In fact, it's actually taken more damage. It might have won the skirmish, but it was a Pyrrhic victory. It's also possible to completely destroy an enemy company or detachment before the



ABOVE: With air, naval, and land forces, the warmonger's toy box is massive.

RIGHT: Even when they're exploding, these Italian towns look lovely.

battle begins. Units can exchange fire once-per-turn on the campaign map, and artillery strikes from your companies or naval support can make fast work of them, saving time and the lives of your troops.

Notably, that naval support isn't off-screen. So not only will you be able to hammer the enemy before you engage in a skirmish, you'll also be able to directly control your ships on the campaign map, moving them into a better position, or even depositing troops behind enemy lines. In this build, it's a doddle, but Relic's planning some coastal threats as well, making a journey by sea a bit riskier for the navy.

HIDE AND SEEK

Plenty more skirmishes will accompany the bespoke missions at launch. As an unrepentant turtler, I'm especially happy to hear that proper defensive missions will be in the mix, giving you time to set up your fortifications and lay traps.

Lead mission designer Sacha Narine tells me that he wants to give

THEY'RE GOOD COMPANY

Meet a few of the companies you'll be able to field



BRITISH ARMoured

"The steel cavalry"
These are the lads who helped me take Monte Cassino. Great for tank-lovers, this company uses mechanised tactics and the beefy Churchill tank to soak up damage, push through the front line, and protect infantry.



BRITISH ARTILLERY

"The bravest of the brave"
This company makes use of devastating artillery strikes to soften up targets, both on the campaign map and during the RTS battles, preparing the enemy for an assault from elite Gurkha infantry.



US AIRBORNE

"We shine behind enemy lines"
Infuriate the Germans with this company's best trick: dropping paratroopers, heavy weapons, and resources behind enemy lines. It's the perfect company for taking points quickly, and it's pretty good at holding them too.



US SPEC OPS

"Never see us coming"
This sneaky company uses elite special forces units, stealth, and advanced weaponry to get the drop on enemies and take them out quickly and efficiently. It's a nice change of pace from *Company of Heroes 3*'s usually explosive battles.



the defensive skirmishes more of a handmade feel, referencing the excellent Carentan Counterattack mission from the first *Company of Heroes*, which gave you ten minutes to build up your defences before the hordes of Germans arrived. And then there are the more unusual modes, like skirmishes where you need to rout and then chase the enemy so nobody can escape.

As I get to work liberating Italy, some chums chime in. I've got a trio of advisors, representing the British, US, and Italian partisan forces. These characters give the war a face, along with another path to unlock more upgrades and abilities, ethical conundrums, and some internal tension. The most interesting among them might be the partisan advisor, who reflects the civilian



ENEMY COMMANDERS HAVE PERSONALITIES THAT INFORM THEIR TACTICS



GLAMPING *Rating the US faction buildings*



1 GUN EMPLACEMENT
Well, this is hardly bigger than a regular two-person tent, and that big gun looks like it takes up a lot of room. 2/10

2 BARRACKS
OK, this is a little better, but you'll also need to share it with a bunch of other sweaty soldiers, some of whom likely snore. 4/10

3 TANK DEPOT
On the upside, you get to share this tent with a tank! On the downside, you have to share this tent with a tank. 5/10

4 HQ
You've got plenty of room for activities, be they work or leisure, and a medical tent in case you fall into nettles. 10/10



to opt in to get a bit more depth and understanding behind each sub commander's vision for the war."

KNOW YOUR ENEMY

The Germans aren't faceless adversaries, either. Enemy commanders have personalities that inform their tactics, and may react differently depending on the situation – a commander on the edge of obliteration with seemingly nothing to lose might become ultra aggressive and make you fight harder for every kill. These aren't things you'll necessarily know straight away, but if you're mates with the partisans, they'll be able to dig up that kind of information.

While I'm painting the campaign map my colour, I get alerted to the presence of a special named opponent and nemesis of the partisans, Taube. This leads to a hunt for the deadly tank commander, which I'm able to speed up by finding key intel. Our first and final meeting takes place in a real-time tank brawl around a small town, culminating in what almost feels like a boss battle, his intimidating Tiger II heavy tank against my considerably more vulnerable troops. I take him out, but the town is dust.

Bent says the narrative team is still exploring ways to add more personality to all sides of the war, and it definitely pays off in the demo. The brutal battle with Taube is a highpoint in this slice of the campaign, and it's that victory that finally makes me feel ready to march to the end, to Monte Cassino.

END OF THE LINE

Since I opted not to bomb Monte Cassino, the Germans are well-fortified and waiting for me, but at least they don't have any backup from Taube and his tanks. It's a large map, dominated by a huge hill and one big, winding road, which the enemy forces are obviously keeping a close eye on. Knowing they'll be light on tanks, however, I strike with an armoured company, and it proves to be the right call. The journey up that mountain is slow and painful, and at the top I notice I have absolutely no infantry left. What I do have, however, is five Churchill tanks, and boy do we have some fun. The picturesque setting is turned into craters and rubble, quite a lot of it thanks to me, but I can't feel sad. I've taken Monte Cassino.

Relic estimates that it should take around four hours to complete the slice I was fighting through. I played for 11. There were some known bugs and performance issues slowing me down towards the end, but I really spent so long in Italy because I didn't want to finish the war. I've been wandering this RTS desert for years, but now there's this oasis, and for a day I got to submerge myself in it. Even in this early state, *Company of Heroes 3* is very impressive, and I just hope it isn't some sort of mirage. And you can check it out for yourself. While it won't be launching until 2022, a pre-alpha demo is already available via the Games2Gether programme. You'll be able to blow up tanks and breach buildings with flamethrowers until August 3. ■

» contributions to the war, and their toll. When my American bud tells me to bomb Monte Cassino, to make our assault easier, his partisan counterpart warns that there might be civilians hiding in the area we're targeting, advising me to send in partisans first to make sure. Some choices aren't either/or deals, so picking one suggestion doesn't necessarily mean you can't then pick the others, but sometimes you're going to have to ignore someone's advice, which they won't like.

"One of the big themes of the narrative is the rivalry between America and the UK," says lead narrative designer Báirbre Bent. But while you might pick favourites, over the course of the war you can still try to please everyone. "In fact, that's possibly the best way," she adds. And you'll get to know them, too. "One thing we're looking into is a way that you can get a deeper understanding of why these sub commanders want you to do what they've asked you. And we're hoping to bring that in – that there'll be a way for the player

ABOVE: It's always stressful when it looks like you'll miss your flight.



The road to Monte Cassino looks nice, but it's lethal.

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TREASURES IV

Celebrating PC gaming's
long love affair with
D&D's **FORGOTTEN REALMS.**

by Jeremy Peel



UNRECORDED

The great irony in the title of *Dungeons & Dragons*' most popular setting is that we've never been allowed to forget it. Since the 1980s, when the genre we'd recognise as the RPG was born, any year without a release that takes us to the Sword Coast, or Icewind Dale, or the dungeons beneath Waterdeep has been an exception. If history is made up of stories that exist in the collective memory, then the city of Baldur's Gate is as real as Los Angeles or New York. »

Treasured Memories

» Strange, then, to think of a time when the Realms existed only within the bounds of a single head, situated somewhere in the suburbs of Toronto in the mid 1960s. The author Ed Greenwood invented the setting in his childhood daydreams, scribbling stories that followed a wheezing, Falstaff-inspired rogue named Mirt the Moneylender from port to port as he dodged his creditors. Where Mirt moved, the world grew, ultimately spawning the stretch of coastal cities where the lion's share of Forgotten Realms games still take place. Greenwood imagined the Realms to be part of a multiverse including Earth, a world which humanity had visited but quite literally forgotten – hence the name, and the knights and dragons that so resembled archetypes from Earth's own mythology.

When Dungeons & Dragons invaded hobby shops across the West, Greenwood began telling his stories on the tabletop, filling in the gaps at the behest of his players. By the time he sold his hand-drawn master maps to Dungeons & Dragons' initial publisher, TSR, the continent of Faerûn and its best-known landmarks were firmly established.

TSR might have bought the Realms, but once the legendary 'old

grey box' of the 1987 Forgotten Realms campaign set was opened, Faerûn effectively belonged to everyone. Its world was expanded whenever a dungeon master invented a monster to hold their group's attention, and changed every time a player set out with a sword to make it a better place.

TOLKEIN HEADS

Among Greenwood's new co-writers were game developers: *Pool of Radiance* came out a year later. It was an extraordinary hit, and like many PC games to come, translated reams of D&D rules directly into code. "My earliest Forgotten Realms memory is playing *Pool of Radiance* with my brother in our shared bedroom back in the '80s," says Aaron Forsythe, now Magic: The Gathering's vice president of design. "God, it was just hours and hours of that."

As new storytellers flooded into the Realms, the familiarity that Greenwood had baked into its foundations worked in the setting's favour. It's the surface blandness of the Realms that, counterintuitively, makes it such an alluring canvas for fantasy – its temperate, Tolkein-esque default accessible to anybody with a grasp on what a goblin is, and flexible enough to accommodate almost any



ABOVE: Drizzt's scimitars are called Icingdeath and Twinkle, like Etsy cake decorations.



Image credit: Piotr Dura



Image credit: Tibus Lunter

DRAGON'S TAIL

Selected works from PC's long history with Faerûn



POOL OF RADIANCE 1988

First of the legendary Gold Box games. A little too basic to enjoy today.



EYE OF THE BEHOLDER 1990

Hope you like thick stone walls. Classic dungeon crawler courtesy of C&C's Westwood.



NEVERWINTER NIGHTS 1991

You'll find no MMOs older than this one. None with graphics, anyway.



swords-and-sorcery adventure. “You don’t need lots of deep explanation to get into it and start playing,” says Ray Winninger, executive producer of Wizards of the Coasts’ D&D studio. “But there are layers upon layers of interesting stuff that’s been added over the years. There are many civilisations built on top of each other that you can uncover.”

As TSR was let loose on its lore, the Realms developed new and strange depths. The Underdark, a vast subterranean network first conceived by D&D co-creator Gary Gygax, was bolted on and built out over time – introducing the

THE REALMS DEVELOPED NEW AND STRANGE DEPTHS

matriarchal spider cities of the drow, and the mind flayers, a society of brain-eating, sociopathic slavers. With *Baldur’s Gate III*, Larian has latched onto the lawyer-like devils of the Nine Hells, who do evil in the small print of their contracts. Today, the Realms are precisely as weird as you want them to be.

They’re also rather less vague, the corners of the maps having long since been filled in. Back when Winninger made his *Forgotten Realms* debut – writing a 1995 sourcebook on giants – little effort was made to centralise the setting’s lore.

SUNDER AND LIGHTNING

“There were a lot of different people creating a lot of different things,” he says. “Finding little places they could insert their own Lego pieces. There wasn’t any kind of committee steering the broader future of the Realms, it was an ad hoc kind of creation.” By the time *Baldur’s Gate*



BALDUR’S GATE 1998

Enter Bioware. *Baldur’s Gate’s* real-time, RTS-style combat changed RPGs forever.



ICEWIND DALE 2000

A tactical combat game built on *Baldur’s Gate’s* engine, with a wonderful, wintry atmosphere.



BALDUR’S GATE II: SHADOWS OF AMN 2000

Arguably still Bioware’s best game. Certainly its darkest world, with companions who kill each other.



ICEWIND DALE II 2002

Featured the Infinity Engine at its most technologically advanced. Sadly, the source code is lost.

Treasured Memories

came out in 1998, however, D&D had a new owner in Wizards of the Coast. Recognising the popularity of the Realms, the company made efforts to organise its running. When planning the cataclysmic Sundering, for instance, it held a days-long summit where bestselling authors like Greenwood and RA Salvatore hashed out the events to come with Dungeons & Dragons' designers, as if attending a high fantasy G7.

"I'm pretty confident there's been nothing as grandiose as that in quite a while," Winner says. "But when [D&D senior story designer] Chris Perkins runs into Bob Salvatore at a convention someplace, they sit down and strategise."

Part of the Realms' magic is its flat hierarchy of fiction. Though it hosts novels, PC games, and tabletop campaigns, none are subservient. It's a trait all but unique in the sphere of fantasy IP – where spin-off works tend to be regarded as lesser or ultimately disregarded as non-canon. In the most notorious example,

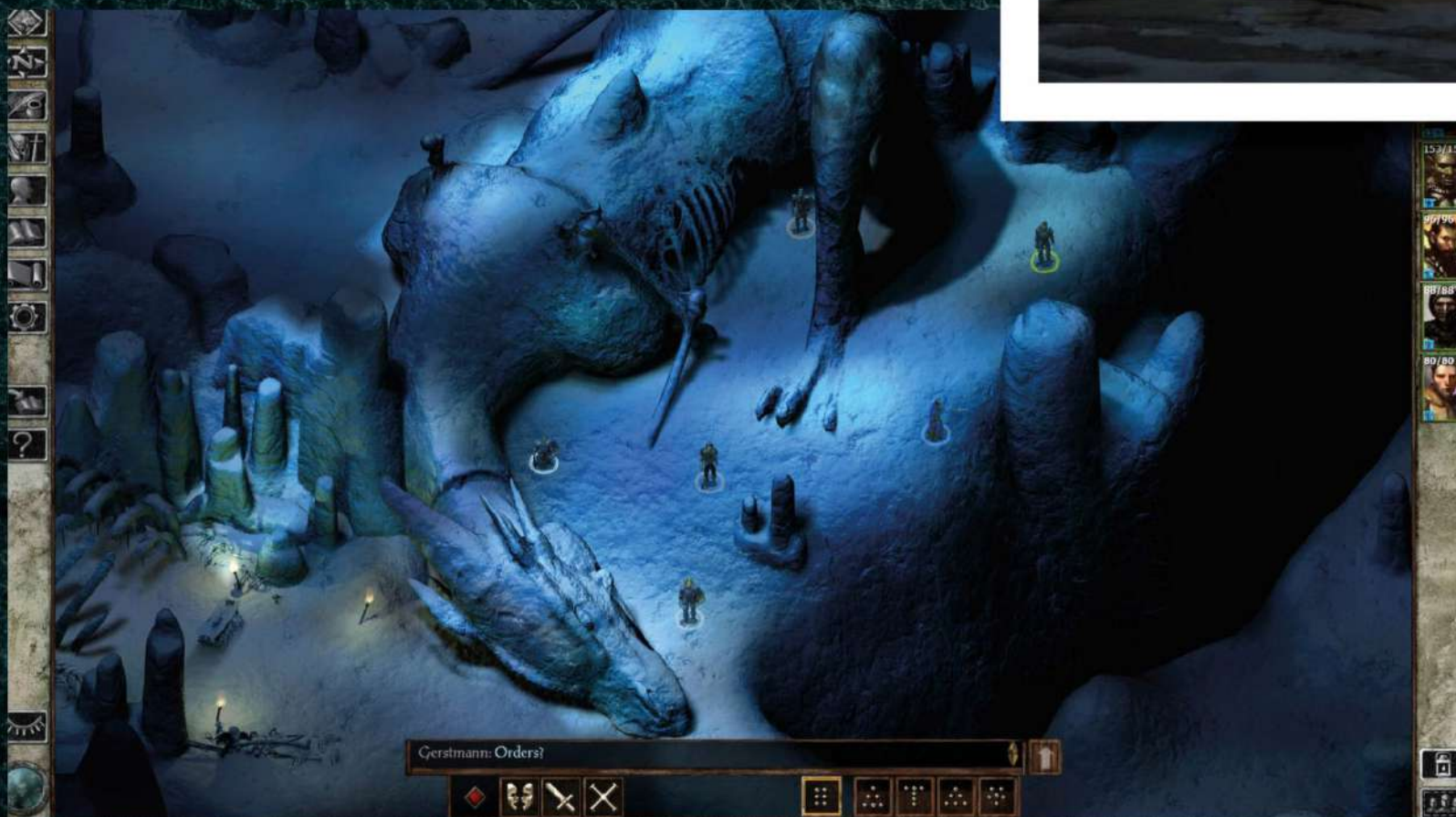
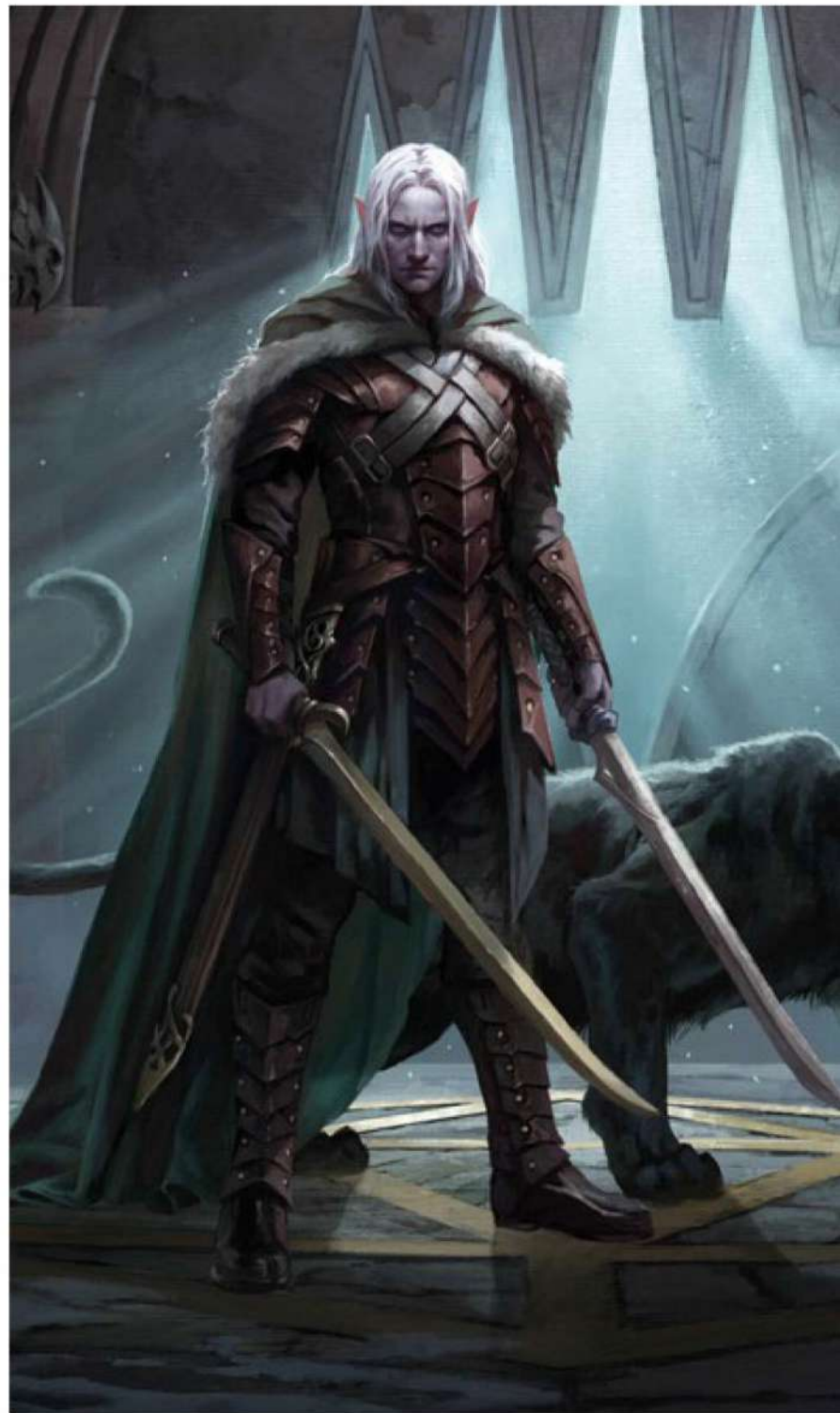
Disney declared in 2014 that decades of fiction in the Star Wars universe would be retconned overnight.

By contrast, every adventure in the Realms is a valid entry point to its world, and characters from any medium stand a chance of becoming beloved. Minsc, *Baldur's Gate's* rambunctious barbarian, has crossed over into tabletop modules – while no PC game set in the Realms is complete without a cameo from Salvatore's hero, Drizzt Do'Urden.

"As rich as Drizzt's history is and evocative as those novels are, one of the things that keeps people going back to them is a very simple, tried and true story that's worked for aeons," Winner says. "He's the western hero. He's the lone samurai who's chosen to reject society and is dealing with that."

APOCALYPSE NOW

At one time, the buildup of shared stories in the Forgotten Realms began to look like a problem, leaving Wizards with little room to



ABOVE: The latest Magic: The Gathering card set is a crossover set in the Forgotten Realms.



NEVERWINTER NIGHTS 2002

Unrelated to the MMO, this so-so Bioware campaign sat atop a powerful adventure-building toolkit.



NEVERWINTER NIGHTS: HORDES OF THE UNDERDARK 2003

Much too good for an expansion. From Waterdeep to hell and back again.



DEMON STONE 2004

Hack and slash written by RA Salvatore and co-starring his cast from the Drizzt novels.



NEVERWINTER NIGHTS 2 2006

Obsidian never got to make its *Baldur's Gate III*, but released a serviceable NWN sequel.



manoeuvre. When the publisher released D&D's fourth edition in 2008, it advanced the world's timeline by a century and triggered the Spellplague, an event that transformed whole countries and altered creatures.

The shift justified new design changes and cleared the decks for newcomers with no investment in the lore. But it also proved unpopular with authors like Salvatore and Greenwood, who found many of their characters suddenly aged out of existence. Heroes who had previously guested in PC games were now nothing but bleached bone. The Realms were cut off from their great strength: their history.

It's a decision that's still impacting PC games today. *Baldur's Gate III*, for instance, takes place a century after *Baldur's Gate II*, limiting its connection to the cast and consequences of previous games. But it's not something that's likely to happen again. "We learned some big lessons during playtesting for fifth

edition that cut against the conventional wisdom for D&D at the time," WotC says. "People don't really want some of the things we always thought they did."

Players wanted to feel more in control of the setting, it turned out, and storylines like the Sundering and the Spellplague got in the way. "We retreated back to D&D first principles," WotC says. "The game, the world, and the story belongs to the DM. We try to give you a toy box and stay out of your way."

The same philosophy holds true for the D&D studio's dealings with game developers – who often need encouragement to be less reverential in their treatment of Forgotten Realms lore. Early in *Baldur's Gate III*'s development, Larian would ask "intricate, down in the weeds questions" about the geography of the Sword Coast and its cities.

ANTI-CANON

"You're the DM," WotC's team would tell the studio. "You can have that famous statue in Waterdeep face any direction you want. You've got the freedom to take these mind flayers and make them what they need to be for your game to be fun. That's OK, they're literally designed that way to allow you to do that." The Forgotten Realms is now deep into its

fourth decade as a universe built in collaboration with its players – and Wizards of the Coast has learned not to sweat the details. "What keeps us all sane is that we each cling to our own continuity," WotC says. "Every game or novel is like an individual DM's expression of the Realms. We honestly don't put a lot of effort into making sure that all the details tie between those things, just as they wouldn't necessarily between my Forgotten Realms campaign and yours. As we chart the future of D&D, we're very much looking to not get so hung up on this idea that everything has to fit into a single continuity."

It's an approach that, like so much of the Forgotten Realms, was first mapped out by Ed Greenwood long ago. It was his idea to tell the lore of the world in two voices: that of Elminster, a secretive and playful old mage, and that of Volo, a scholar known for the inaccuracy of his guidebooks. The stories of the Realms have always been tall tales, delivered by unreliable narrators. Its past isn't so much a textbook as an epic poem, which can be altered according to the needs of the storyteller.

In other words, that *Neverwinter Nights* module you never finished building is no less a part of the Realms than a Bioware campaign. Stick that in your pipe, Elminster. ■

AN EVENT THAT TRANSFORMED WHOLE COUNTRIES



SWORD COAST LEGENDS 2015

The director of *Dragon Age: Origins*. The promise of playing a live DM. Yet: mediocrity.



BALDUR'S GATE: SIEGE OF DRAGONSPEAR 2016

The enhanced editions culminated in this brand-new 'interquel', set between the two original games.



IDLE CHAMPIONS OF THE FORGOTTEN REALMS 2017

One of those self-playing clicker games. Good, as far as those things go.



DARK ALLIANCE 2021

Delivers Icewind Dale in 3D, and invites Drizzt's crew to kill some notably nasty monsters. Check out our review on p64!



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REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

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Myth take

We're so utterly spoiled for games these days. Even in dry months, there's such an enormous volume hitting digital storefronts every day, to the point that absolutely brilliant releases can fly under the radar.

Case in point: I think *Wilderness* is a properly astonishing game, and barely anyone's talking about it, let alone lavishing it with deserved praise. It makes me feel like I've lost my mind a bit. Someone combined *XCOM* with intricate procedural storytelling and the sensibilities of a grand, generation-spanning RPG – how are people not filling my Twitter feed with it? Why are they still waffling on about *Valheim* and *Overwatch* instead?

And then, a scarier idea forms: if they're all missing out on this gem, what have I missed out on? What ace game has flown under my radar while I get in another 100 rounds of *Legends of Runeterra*? Oh no...

ROBIN VALENTINE
PRINT EDITOR

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WHAT YOU THINK

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's dungeoneering, dragon-slaying reviewers...



ANDY KELLY
Specialist in
Pronouncing 'Drizzt'
Currently playing
Dungeons & Dragons: Dark Alliance
This month
Had a lot of people on Twitter tell him his score was wrong.



TYLER WILDE
Specialist in
Long-distance duelling
Currently playing
Chivalry II
This month
Investigated the aerodynamic properties of a medieval broadsword.



JON BOLDING
Specialist in
Papering over cracks
Currently playing
Roguebook
This month
Discovered a lot of cards inside a book. No wonder there's so much deforestation.



ALISTAIR JONES
Specialist in
Block parties
Currently playing
Lego Builder's Journey
This month
Felt like a little kid again. It's just lucky for us he didn't start writing like one.



JAMES DAVENPORT
Specialist in
Poly horror
Currently playing
Cruelty Squad
This month
Yep, he found another garish nightmare game to rave about.



TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Digital smuggling
Currently playing
Pocket Wonder Sport
This month
Used a minigame collection to trick us into including extra free games.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Pixelated snark
Currently playing
Thimbleweed Park
This month
Had to endure someone else's sarcastic quips for a change.

SLICE AND DICE

Gut goblins galore in **DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: DARK ALLIANCE**

By Andy Kelly

If you're looking for Dungeons & Dragons without the dice rolls then *Dark Alliance* is for you. It's an intense, combat-focused action-RPG where you slay monsters, collect loot, and fight alongside a party of powerful heroes – but without the usual trappings of a traditional RPG. There are no walls of dialogue or deep, lengthy quests to be found here. Just a lot of goblins and other foul beasts to kill, and some very impressive looking locations to do it in.

In *Dark Alliance* we follow the Companions of the Hall, a legendary band of adventurers led by D&D favourite Drizzt Do'urden, as they search for a magical MacGuffin called the Shard. Armies of villains and monsters from all corners of Faerûn – the titular 'dark alliance' – are lusting after the Shard and the power it holds, and you have to stop them. It's a pretty standard fantasy plot, but given weight and authenticity by the involvement of veteran D&D scribe, and teller of some of Icewind Dale's most memorable tales, RA Salvatore. The story takes place just after *The Crystal Shard*, the first novel in the author's Icewind Dale trilogy, meaning there's plenty of crossover with the books.

Icewind Dale is a chilly, frozen tundra, and one of the most storied and evocative regions of Faerûn. Fans of Black Isle's classic Infinity Engine RPG of the same name will get an extra kick out of returning to this frosty realm of ice dragons, snowbound mountain passes, and deep dwarven halls. It's Dungeons & Dragons at its best, and an enjoyably dramatic backdrop for an action-RPG. The world is immense in scale and layered with history, and it's one of the most vibrant, vivid depictions of the Forgotten Realms I've seen in a game. *Dark Alliance* is a linear action game, so you don't get to explore the world as thoroughly as you would in an RPG. But what's there is stunning to look at.

The art is magnificent throughout – particularly the cavernous,

atmospheric environments, which are like the covers of vintage fantasy novels come to life. A particular standout is a crystal fortress hidden in the mountains, crawling with creepy Shard-worshipping cultists and glowing eerily in the pale moonlight.

You also visit the shattered remains of an ancient city, a massive dwarven forge that is criss-crossed with rivers of molten metal, and a twisting valley that's become a ramshackle, makeshift city for a horde of bickering goblins. Everything here is exaggerated, colourful, and much larger than life, which is incredibly refreshing to see in this era of darker, more muted medieval fantasy.

The world is immense in scale and layered with history

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A fantasy action-RPG with co-op

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Tuque Games

PUBLISHER
Wizards of the Coast

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080 Super, Intel i7-9700K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
1-4

LINK
darkalliance.com

FROSTY RECEPTION

The monsters look superb too. By the time you reach the end of *Dark Alliance*'s story you'll have slain an entire bestiary of classic D&D monsters, including dragons, beholders, duergar, giants, trolls, wraiths, and thousands upon thousands of stinky, butt-slapping goblins. These familiar creatures have all been brought vividly to life, with expressive animation, amusing voice acting, and a spread of unique abilities that make them a joy to fight. They're wonderfully *hateful* too, which makes running a sword through their guts extra delicious. This is the most I've enjoyed battling a bunch of monsters since *Shadow of Mordor*'s similarly characterful orcs.

The giant, flesh-eating verbeeg grab you with their chains and yank you towards them. Trolls are thick-skinned and have regenerating health. Duergar mages knock you off your feet with blasts of ice magic. Cultists teleport around the battlefield and shoot beams of arcane energy at you. It's a really fun, varied selection of enemies – and you frequently fight several types at once, forcing you to mix your tactics up on the fly. It's a relentlessly fast-paced game, rarely giving you more than a few seconds to catch your breath before the next scrap, which is exhilarating and, occasionally, slightly exhausting.

ELF INSPECTOR

There are four playable characters, each bringing a unique flavour to the combat. Drow ranger Drizzt is fast and athletic, carving enemies up with twin scimitars and siccing his spirit panther Guenhwyvar on them. Axe-swinging dwarf king Bruenor is the tank of the party, able to soak up huge amounts of damage and draw aggro by taunting. Wulfgar is a barbarian who can whip himself up into a berserker rage and deal extra damage with a giant hammer. And Catti-brie is a bouncy, nimble archer

FIGHTING SPIRIT

Dark Alliance's four playable heroes



panther Guenhwyvar. One of D&D's most beloved characters.

DRIZZT
Dual scimitar-wielding drow who ranges Icewind Dale with his spirit



but will readily make sacrifices to help others. Handy with an axe.

BRUENOR
The dwarven king of Clan Battlehammer. Bruenor has a gruff demeanour,



an expert with a bow and is known for her pragmatism and strong moral centre.

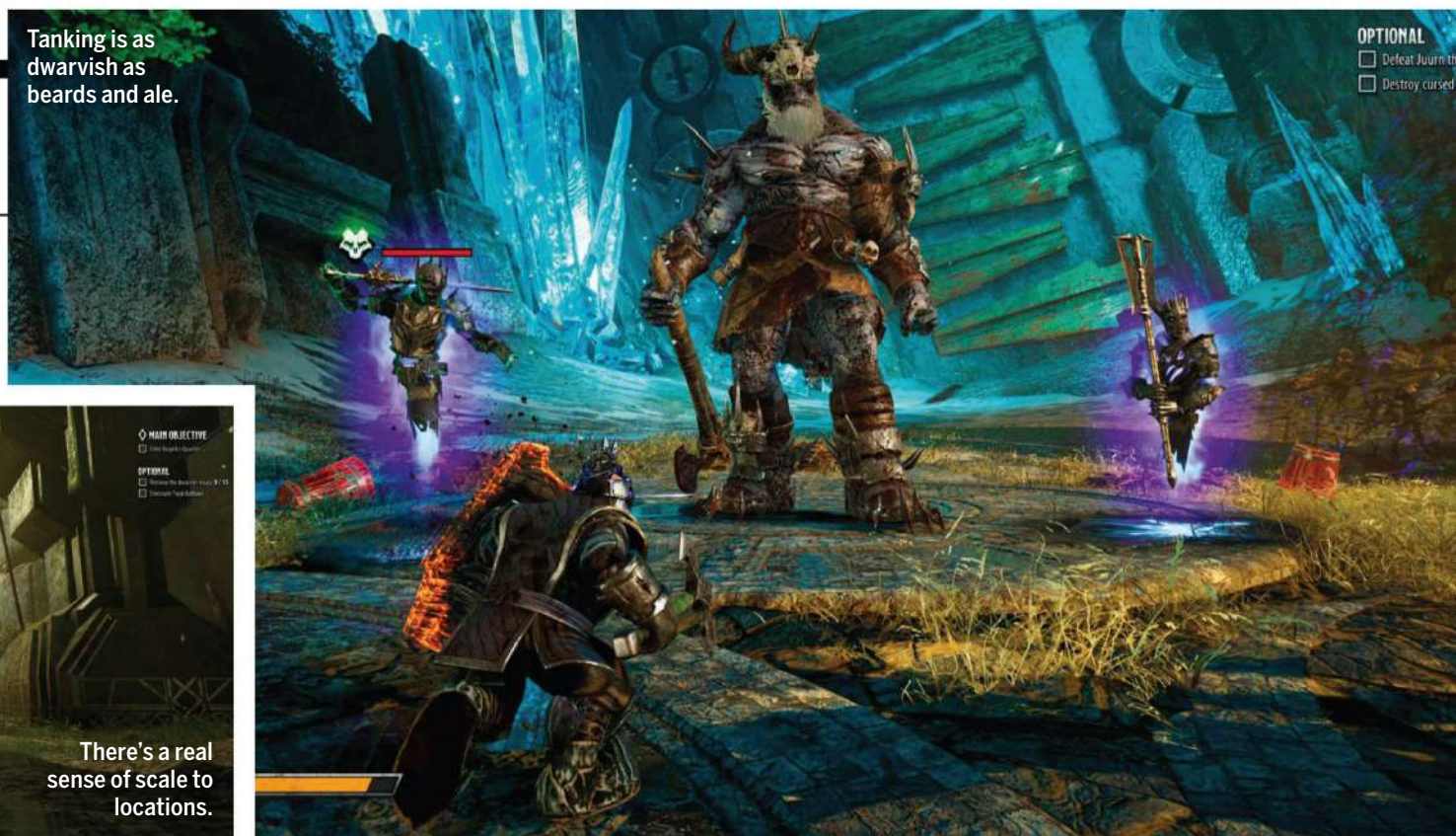
CATTI-BRIE
Adopted and raised by Bruenor among the dwarves, Catti-brie is



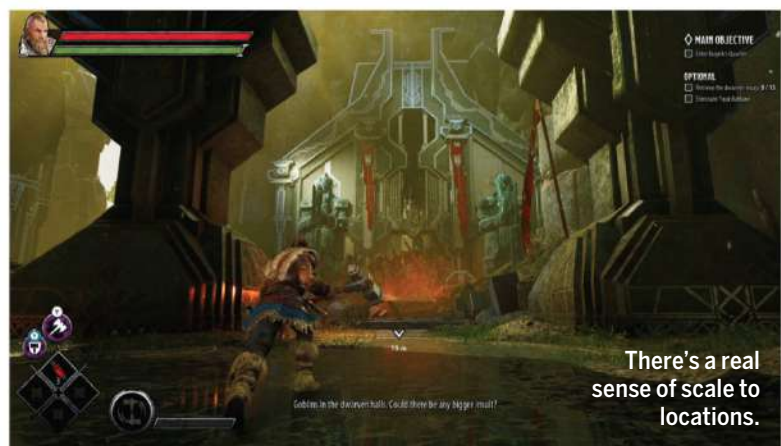
captured him and changed his ways. Favours a massive hammer in combat.

WULFGAR
A barbarian who once belonged to the Reghed horde, before Bruenor

Tanking is as dwarvish as beards and ale.



OPTIONAL
☐ Defeat Jormin
☐ Destroy cursed



There's a real sense of scale to locations.



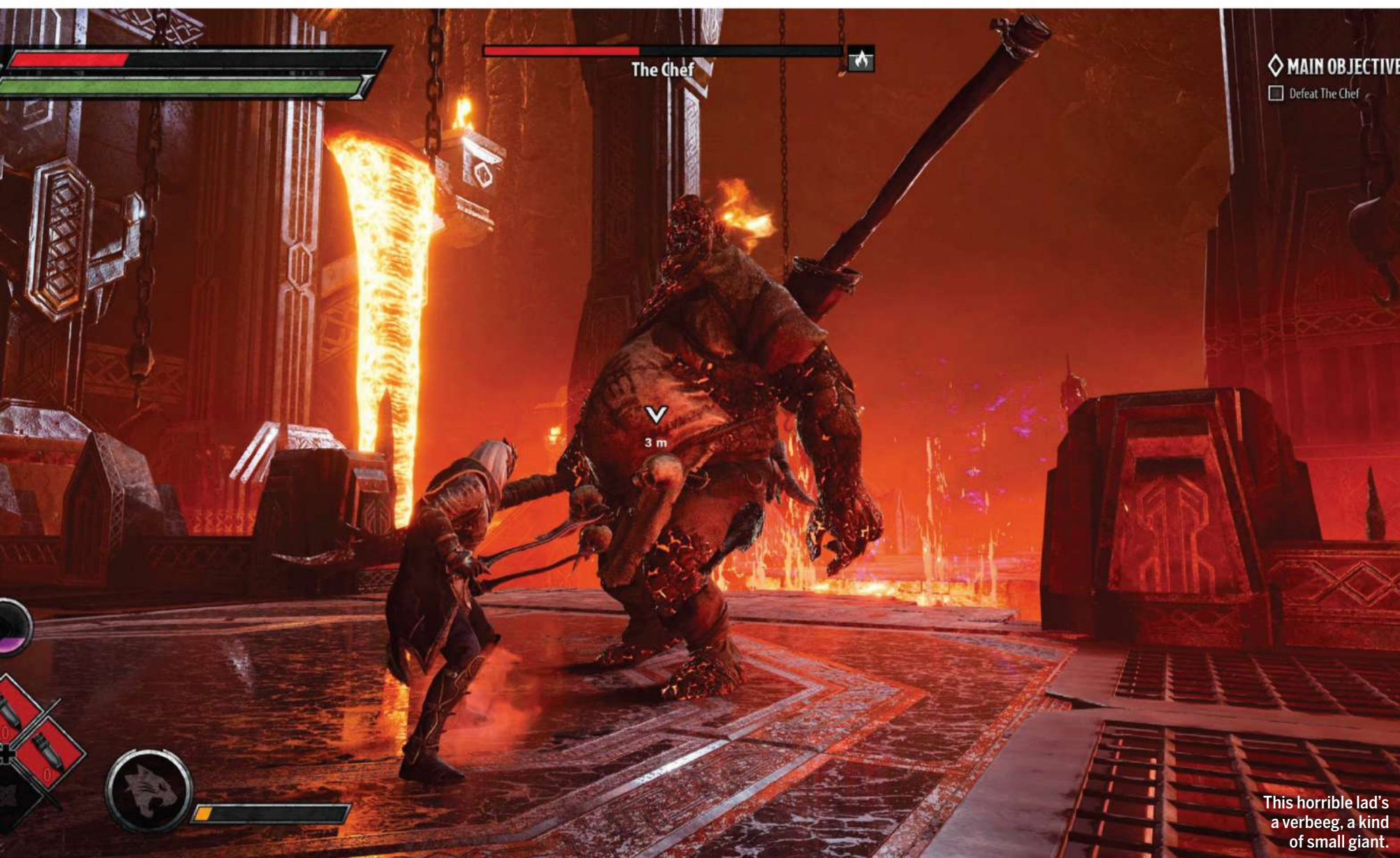
Bruenor can drop an inspiring banner in combat.



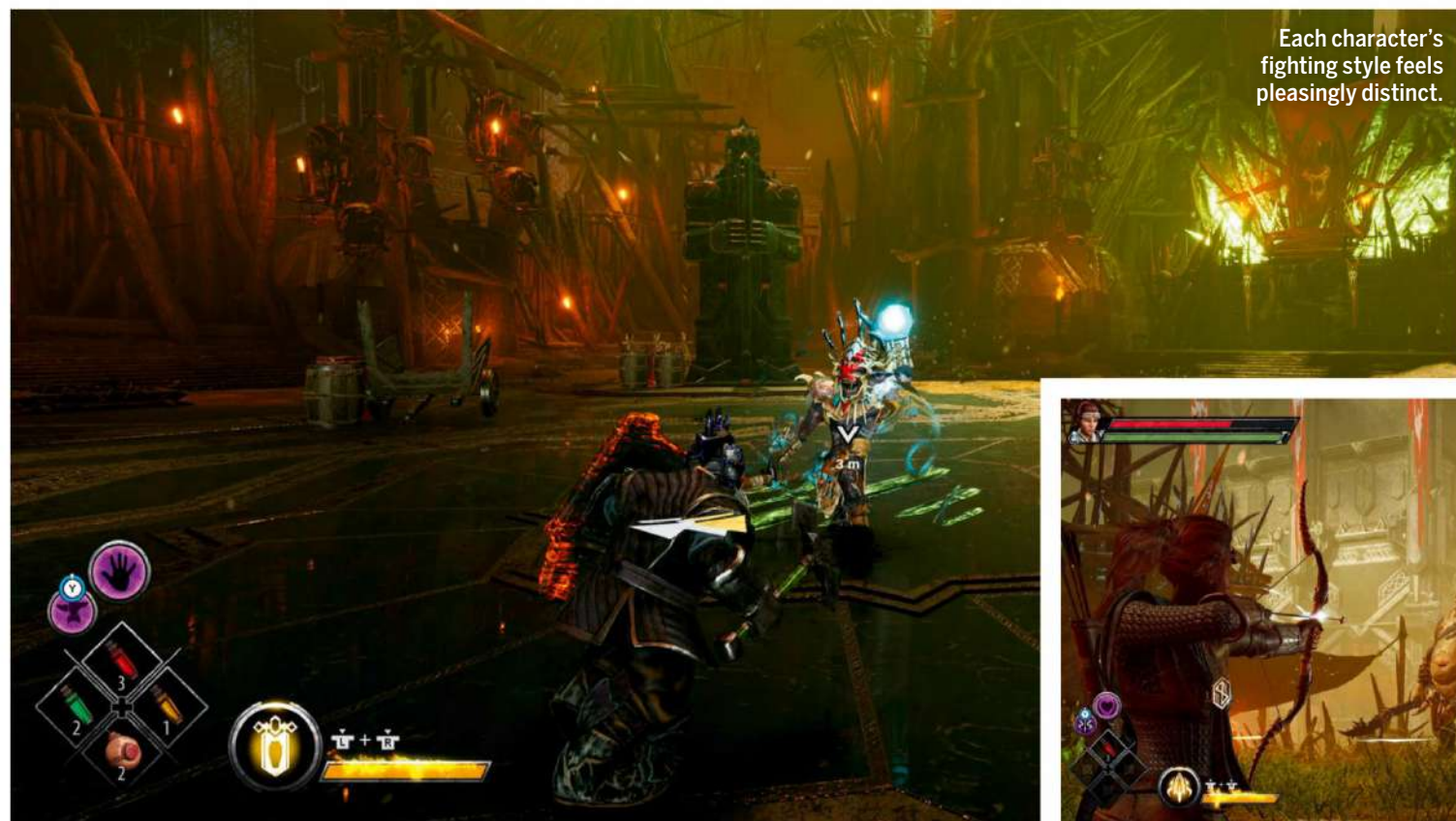
LEFT: Loot is identified and equipped back at town, preventing downtime during missions.



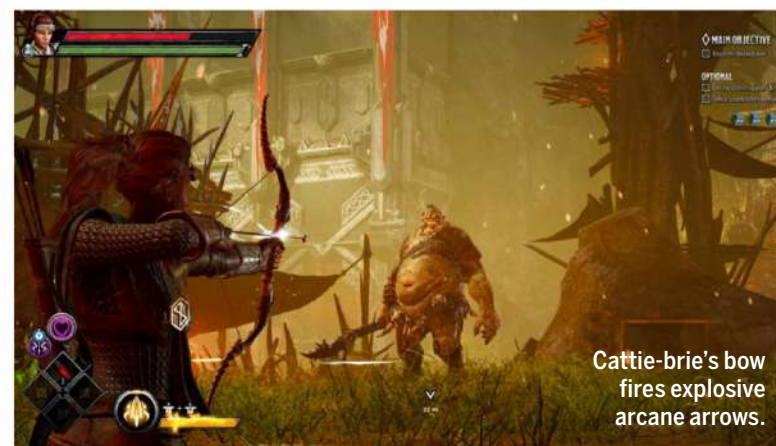
BELOW LEFT: The game is written by Drizt's original creator, RA Salvatore.



This horrible lad's a verbeeg, a kind of small giant.



Each character's fighting style feels pleasingly distinct.

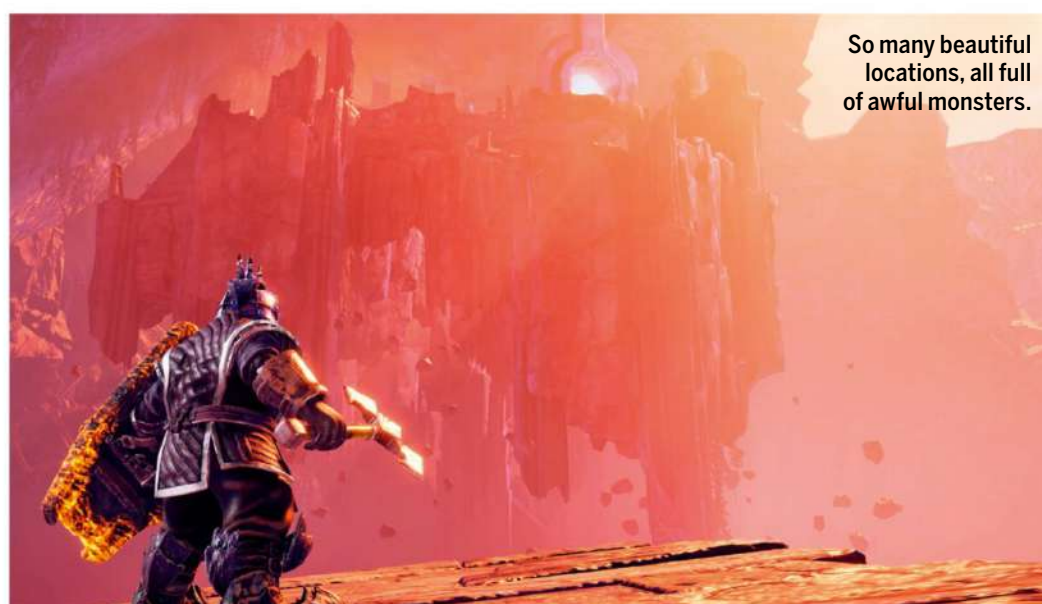


Cattie-brie's bow fires explosive arcane arrows.

RIGHT: Your stamina wears down as you fight – parries help restore it.



BELOW: Can you tell I liked playing as Bruenor?



So many beautiful locations, all full of awful monsters.



I'm tired of getting bossed around. Or beaten. Or eaten.

who can attack from a distance. The flow and feel of the combat differs greatly between characters – and I love how levels unlocked with one character are unlocked for the others, meaning you can experiment with each hero without having to redo parts of the game.

The enemy variety, combined with the ability to block, dodge, and parry, gives *Dark*

Alliance surprising depth. It feels fantastic too. The combat is chunky and tactile, and carving through enemies with a big, heavy weapon is as satisfying as it should be. You can bash

through crowds of weaker enemies without much thought, but stronger foes demand a degree of patience: locking on, rolling away from attacks, blocking just as they strike to parry. It's a heady mix of crowd control and more considered, methodical one-on-one duels, and it works brilliantly – if you can keep up with the frenetic pace.

Dark Alliance has been designed with co-op in mind. The four heroes have MMO-style abilities that complement each other, including stat-boosting buffs and healing spells. You can also trigger team attacks on a single enemy. However, it's entirely possible to play and enjoy the game solo. I played through most of the entire story on my own, and I had a great time with it. You can choose from a number of difficulty settings, the lowest of which makes playing solo a breeze. Nudge it up a notch and you have to think a little more tactically in battles. Higher still and the game becomes genuinely difficult, especially in the late-game dungeon levels where the enemies are stronger and more numerous.

I struggled with a few of these battles – particularly one where I had to fight a large group of regenerating trolls simultaneously. But I always managed to make it to the end of the level, even if it meant dying and respawning a dozen times. Clear an arena of enemies and you'll be given the opportunity to make camp, restore your HP, and trigger a checkpoint. Or you can bypass the checkpoint entirely and increase your loot rarity level instead. This adds a nice element of risk and reward to the game – especially for a lone player. Some enemies will even make

sneering comments about you *daring* to face them alone, which is a very nice touch. It's a great co-op game, and the 30-60 minute levels mean you don't have to set hours aside to play it with time-starved buddies. But I'm delighted the developer made solo play just as valid. I just wish there was an option to fight alongside an AI party in singleplayer.

Dark Alliance has been designed with co-op in mind

DUNGEON BRAWL

Dark Alliance is a brawler first and foremost, and the level design reflects this. Each map is a series of combat arenas linked by corridors, with the

occasional secret passage or chamber marked by a telltale splash of red paint. Most secrets are pretty conspicuous, which seems like a mindful effort by the developer to keep players moving, and keep the action flowing. There are some optional bosses too, but for the most part you're just moving forward in a linear fashion, slaying monsters until you reach the end of the level. Along the way there are traps, the odd

environmental puzzle to solve, piles of gold, and treasure chests. The world is really just a place to have a fight, which pushes the combat, the heart of the game, to the forefront.

A few things did annoy me, though. If you're fighting an enemy next to a ledge, they'll be magically prevented from falling off by an invisible wall. But you'll just keep edging forward as you swing your weapon – and eventually fall through them and off the ledge yourself. Falling doesn't kill you, but it's still frustrating. The readability of the bigger, more chaotic battles can be poor too, with so much going on that you can lose track of who you're fighting, or miss otherwise clearly telegraphed attacks.

I also had some UI issues, including enemy health bars disappearing. In one level a portal stopped working, leaving me stranded on a floating island with no way to kill myself and warp back to the last checkpoint. I had to restart the whole level and repeat around 50 minutes of gruelling battles to get back to where I was. And once I was permanently silenced for no reason, leaving me magic-less for a whole act. My co-op partner also encountered some bugs of his own, so who knows what you might run into when you play. It's a shame, because these issues are a blight on what is otherwise a solid game. With an RTX 2080 Super and an i7-9700K, I was able to play in 4K at max settings at a stable 60fps, which really added to the crunchy feel of the combat.

Bugs aside, *Dark Alliance* is a blast. It brings the world of Dungeons & Dragons to life brilliantly, with meaty combat, a gorgeous world, and some truly despicable monsters to carve up. It's a reminder of what makes the Forgotten Realms such a great fantasy setting, and a welcome chance to return to Icewind Dale, a place a lot of PC gamers, myself included, love. If you're more of an RPG fan, you might find the non-stop combat a bit much. This is a game about killing monsters above all – and it's some of the most joyously brutal monster-killin' on PC, even if you don't have anyone else to play with. ■

DUNGEON MASTERS

D&D videogame deep cuts



DUNGEON HACK 1993

A pseudo-3D RPG with randomly generated dungeons. Reviewers criticised the lack of any meaningful storytelling, but praised the deep character creation and the fact that every playthrough was different.



AL-QADIM: THE GENIE'S CURSE 1994

A slightly odd RPG/adventure game hybrid set in D&D's sandy Al-Qadim campaign setting. Reviewers at the time compared it to the *Legend of Zelda* games, but criticised it for being a shallow RPG.



DARK SUN: WAKE OF THE RAVAGER 1994

A top-down RPG where you control a party of four heroes, set in the post-apocalyptic Dark Sun D&D campaign setting. Critics liked the setting and writing, but slammed the game for its bugs.



DESCENT TO UNDERMOUNTAIN 1998

Developed by Interplay, this dungeon crawler uses the same 3D rendering engine as classic shooter *Descent*. Unfortunately, it's terrible, and many critics called it the worst Dungeons & Dragons game ever made.

PC GAMER VERDICT

An entertaining action-RPG whose monsters are a delight to slay, whether you're playing solo or co-op.

82

FOR THE ORDER

Go out without a limb in **CHIVALRY II**'s glorious medieval battles

By Tyler Wilde

To put it bluntly, this game is some of the most fun you can have on PC right now. It's a riveting, theatrical medieval warfare game that's equally about martial arts mastery and roleplaying as a Middle Ages buffoon. Sometimes you spend 30 intense seconds expertly duelling another player with swords, other times you're skewered by a ballista bolt while shaking your fist and declaring that you're "power incarnate".

At the centre of *Chivalry II* are 64-player team objective-based matches. These are multi-stage battles that see castles sieged with rolling towers and ladders, peasants slaughtered, and caravans ambushed. They all start roughly the same way: both teams lined up and sprinting at each other with swords, axes, polearms, maces, bows, and more. I approach these charges by smashing the 'yell' key to howl stupidly, throwing my shield into the mass of bodies, chucking my sword after it, and then meeting the enemy with hacks from my secondary axe. If I'm lucky, I break through the line and chase down the cowardly archers who stopped running 50 yards short of the fight.

Subsequent lives in *Chivalry II*'s objective maps have quieter beginnings. You spawn a short jog away from the front line, where one team is trying to accomplish a typically medieval goal (burn the tents, push the siege towers, destroy the trebuchet), while the other stands in the way. Each map tells the story of a battle between two factions, the Agathians and the Masons, a setup that could have been superfluous, but which is treated with such comedic seriousness that it feels essential. There's even a lore codex.

I always try to win, but treating *Chivalry II* like an esports is like expecting WWE Hell in a Cell matches to adhere to the rules of Greco-Roman wrestling. It's theatre. Sometimes you'll come across two players bowing at each other, or

crouching up and down. What are they doing? It doesn't matter. Leave them be. If I need a break from blocking, kicking, jabbing, feinting and riposting, I'll pick up someone's head or whatever else I can find lying around and stand around shouting.

Each map tells the story of a battle between two factions

PARRY ME
The casual atmosphere somewhat belies *Chivalry II*'s complex and challenging melee

combat system. Its best achievement is that it is possible to fight multiple opponents and win. You could see it simply being pointless: getting hit interrupts your attacks, so how could you have a chance with multiple enemies trying to hit you? The

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
64-player medieval warfare with melee weapons, bows and big set pieces

EXPECT TO PAY
£36

DEVELOPER
Torn Banner Studios

PUBLISHER
Tripwire Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5-9600K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia RTX 2070 Super

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
chivalry2.com

answer is counters and ripostes, specially timed attacks which briefly block all incoming attacks. With skill, it's possible to win a one-on-three, and it feels like being Henry Cavill's Geralt in the scene where he gets the 'butcher' moniker.

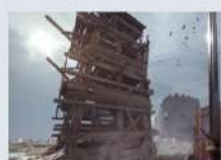
Chivalry II's 2012 predecessor was made by modders turned pro developers, and that do-it-yourself PC heritage shows here. *Chivalry II* has auto matchmaking if you want, but also features a server browser, with support for custom dedicated servers on the update roadmap. The essential graphics options are all there (arbitrary resolution, unlocked framerate, FOV slider, motion blur toggle), and the art is fantastic.

It can be a bit janky, though. One time I accidentally teamkilled a guy because hucking bandages into his face registered as damage instead of healing. Bug fixes are coming, but *Chivalry II* will probably never be perfectly well-behaved software. (Games described as 'polished' tend not to be this fun, though, so maybe it's for the best.)

New maps are also on the way, and eventually horses. Those content updates will be free. The only in-game purchase I can see is a currency that lets you unlock cosmetic items faster than you would by playing. The weapon unlocks (which have to be earned) increase your loadout options at a reasonable pace. It's a fine way to provide milestones for newcomers, but I like playing *Chivalry II* because it's fun to win fights or come up with stupid roleplaying ideas, not because I'm driven to unlock more stuff. It's a novel idea, games that are fun regardless of how much stuff you can collect, but I think it may catch on. ■

THE SIEGE OF RUDHELM

How an objective-based battles plays out



1 The Agathians escort two giant siege towers to the Mason walls.



2 The Masons do their best to defend a capture point on the wall.



3 The Agathians burn a bunch of tents, which seems unnecessary.



4 After rudely burning some tents, the Agathians push siege ramps through the town.



5 With the last walls scaled, the Masons try to hold the gallows outside the central keep.



6 Inside the keep, the highest-scoring Mason player spawns as the Heir.

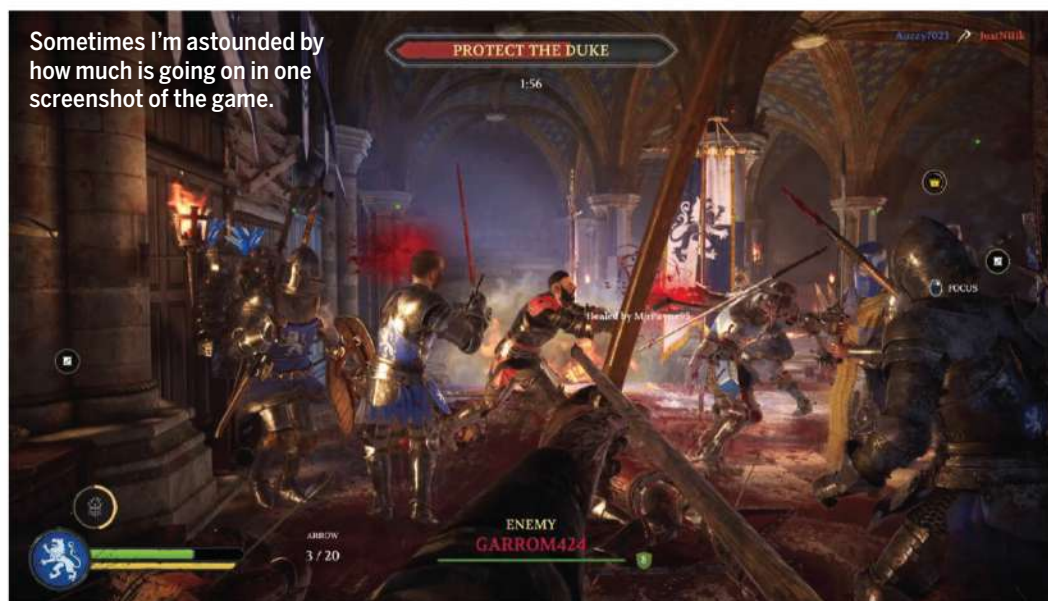
PC GAMER VERDICT

Chivalry II is a brilliant mix of high skill and low comedy, and is certainly the best medieval combat game out there.

91



Sometimes I'm astounded by how much is going on in one screenshot of the game.

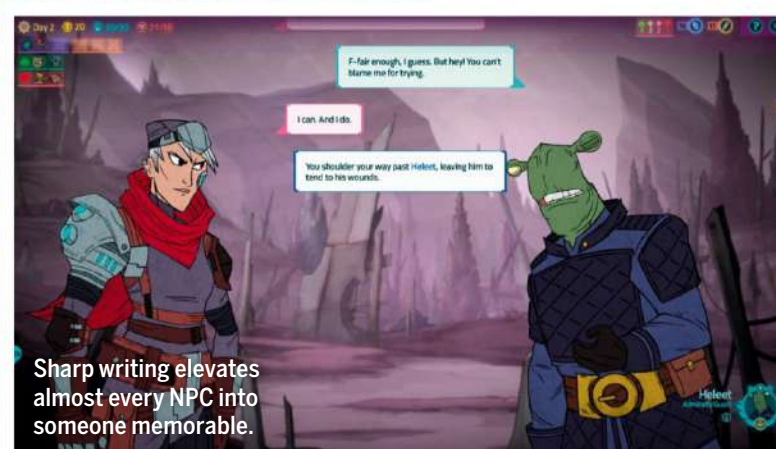
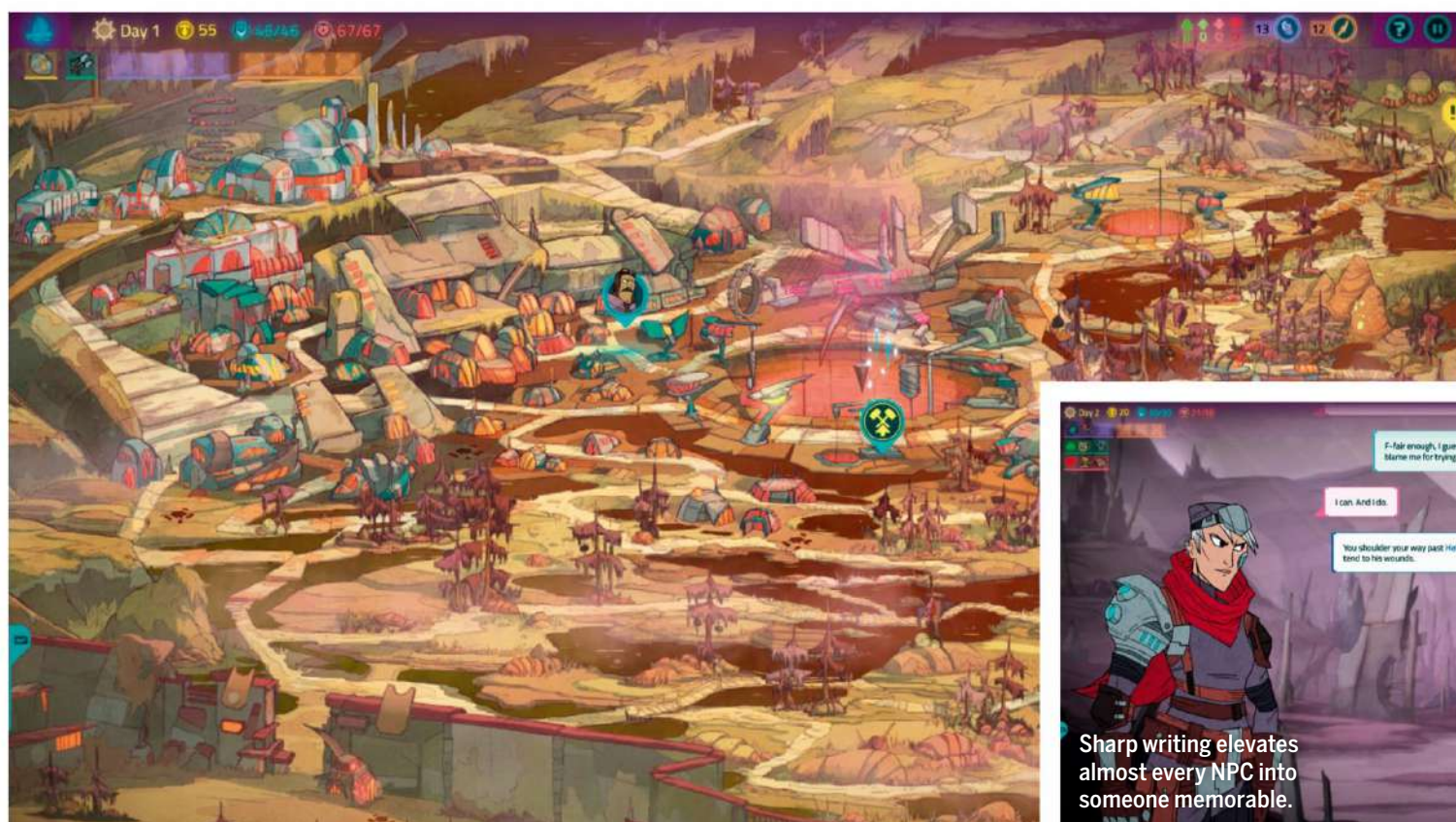


ABOVE: The meaty fists, the tonsure top, the grinning 'stache: truly a dude's dude.

LEFT: The moment before I brain this guy with my favourite weapon.



In the right hands, a hatchet can match any sword.

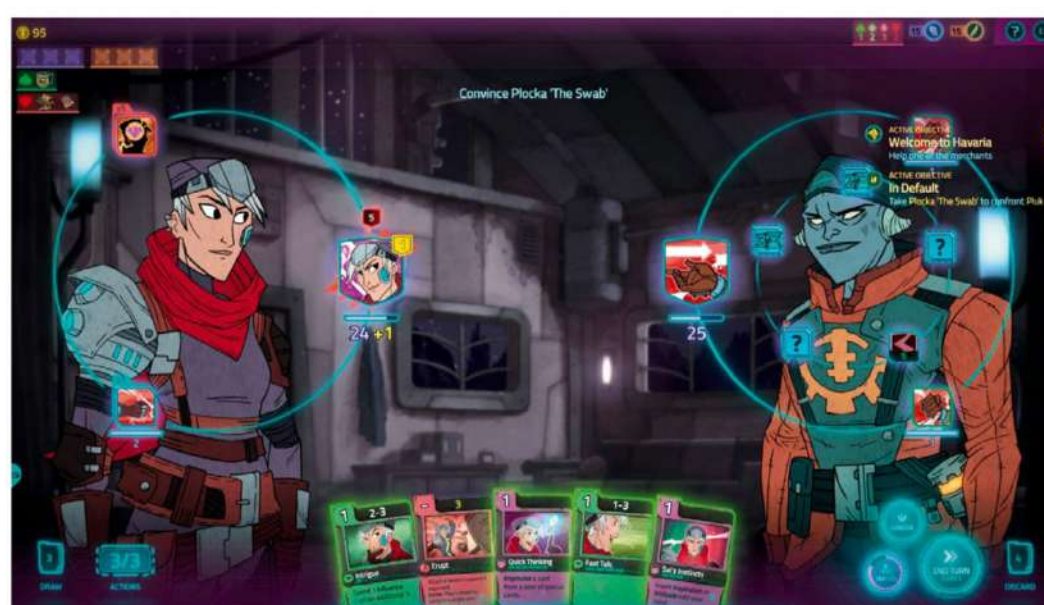
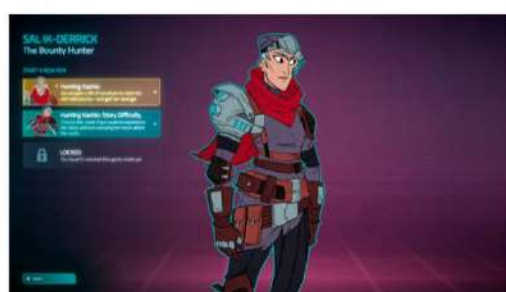


Sharp writing elevates almost every NPC into someone memorable.

ABOVE: The overworlds have a great look to them.

RIGHT: *Griftlands* boasts some distinct and charming characters.

BELOW RIGHT: There are three grifters to play as, but Sal remained my fave.



Combat is more mundane but still good tactical fun.

SPECIAL GRIFT

Play your cards right and **GRIFTLANDS** will tell you a great story

By Sam Greer

Games have always been looking for ways to make conversations as compelling as the combat. Why can't a tense negotiation feel as gripping as a tough-as-nails boss fight? That's the question *Griftlands* seeks to answer. It makes for a compelling roguelike, thanks to great writing and characters, but doesn't quite live up to the promise of its chatty deck-building systems.

The titular Griftlands consist of chaotic, almost post-apocalyptic sci-fi settlements ruled by corrupt cops and criminal syndicates. Brutal it may be, but it sure is pretty. There's a smart economy to where the

embellishments are made to ensure that the game can deliver on its scope without any rough edges. Character sprites get lovely gestures and expressions that complement the writing while the

overworld map is littered with icons.

Its factions are written in broad caricature, in line with the game's cartoonish nature, but paint a good picture of the world you step into life as a 'grifter', the game's shorthand for smooth talking mercenary. There are three characters to play as (each with their own story) but only one is unlocked to start with – Sal, a once indentured slave now on the hunt for the woman who sold her.

What a relief it is to play an RPG that doesn't involve scrolling through paragraph after paragraph about some guff that happened a thousand years ago. There's an immediacy to everything in *Griftlands*, whether its the world-building or the stakes: life's short, it's only what's in front of you that really matters.

The writing itself is engaging and even the smallest of characters get a chance to make an impression, all the more as you collect a small arsenal of subplots en route to your over-arching goal. For me, the allure of its story was far greater than its expanding deck building.

There are two modes of play: Battles and Negotiations. Both are

turn-based and use cards. In battles, your deck is full of attacks, blocks, and powers – largely fun, but fairly conventional. The negotiations are rather more interesting. For those you draw from an entirely different

deck, and your cards are used for building 'arguments' against your opponent. You're constantly striving for a deft balance of chipping away at your foe's lesser ideas while piling plenty of damage onto their core

argument. I really felt like I was always juggling a lot of plates in the best way, the pressure always on to make the most of each turn.

Cards are used for building 'arguments' against your opponent

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A deck-building, roguelike RPG

EXPECT TO PAY
£15.50

DEVELOPER
Klei Entertainment

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
64-Bit Windows 10, Nvidia GeForce GTX-970, Intel i7-4790K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
klei.com/games/griftlands

PLAY NICE OR SLICE

As an abstraction, it's compelling, but it never quite bridges the space between the actual dialogue and the card game where debates take place. Compared with something like *Signs of the Sojourner*, which much more cleverly uses its mechanics to shape and fuel character interactions, *Griftlands* feels a bit awkward.

The split between pacifist and violent routes can feel a little arbitrary too, but the game does make good on far reaching consequences. Recurring NPCs pop up in unexpected places, leading to tough spots where you might have to contemplate a double cross to achieve your goals. These are also randomised for subsequent runs, to an impressively varied degree, ensuring every playthrough feels reasonably fresh. Which does soften the blow when you die.

You can get a boost on your next run too but there's only so much sting it can take away, and despite the convincing way side missions are generated, the main story remains the same Failing close to the finish line is never not going to take the wind out of your sails.

Shortcomings aside, *Griftlands* is another slice of low-key brilliance from developer Klei. Is there a genre they can't do? Balancing narrative and deck building gave me a much more compelling experience than I often have with card based titles, even if it feels like more could be made of those systems to bolster its storytelling. Still, I'm going to remember my adventures with Sal and the little moments of friendship and betrayal throughout each run. I like playing as a grifter – it ain't much but it sure is a living. ■

FRIENDS IN LOW PLACES

It's not who you know...



POZGO

Pozgo started out as a rival grifter, but once I persuaded him we'd be better off working together, he helped me take care of a tough mercenary, and came to my aid more than once later in my adventure.



PLUK

Not all friendships are perfectly balanced, and I mostly wound up having to rescue Pluk, but she gifted me with a body mod which healed me at the start of each turn. That saved my bacon more than a few times.



LEEQI

Leeqi was the bodyguard at the bar where Sal made her temporary home. I still feel guilty over him. You see, I kept persuading him into tough fights and he kept getting beat up bad. One fight too many and he ended up dead. Oops.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Griftlands succeeds in overcoming the limits of its deck-building with charm and good storytelling.

80

MONSTERS, INK

ROGUEBOOK's deckbuilding dungeon crawl stands out, but avoids greatness

By Jon Bolding

Those who've found their gaming niche in deckbuilding roguelikes have something to be happy for in *Roguebook*, a confident, competent release from Abrakam Entertainment, the creators of *Faeria*. Set in the same world, it's a colourful, whimsical and charming fantasy. It also very proudly fits the genre mould: run-based gameplay that unlocks new cards, treasures, and characters for increasingly powerful builds to take on challenges.

To its credit, and to its detriment, nothing in *Roguebook* is particularly novel. Its familiar parts are arranged in a new way with a few twists. Your deck is a combination of two out of the four characters, each with their own unique cards and talents – you gain access to talents as your deck grows. With your two heroes you move into the book's blank pages, represented with a hex grid, and explore by spending brushes and ink to reveal the painted landscape. You find gold to use at the shop, new cards, adventure events with weird consequences, and fights to flex your deck against.

Fights are straightforward attack card versus block card brawls with a few twists. Your two heroes have positions, leading and following, and cards often swap them around. Moving characters is a big tactical decision: enemies always attack the

leading character, while certain cards can only be used from certain positions. You can also summon allies, who are like battlefield effects that wear down opponents or give

you a limited-use ability. The reward for winning a fight always includes more ink, for a limited reveal, or a new brush for a big one. When you run out it's time to fight the level boss, and at the end of the third level you fight

a big boss to win the run.

A new run is a chance to experiment with a combo of two characters

BOOK 'EM

Win or lose you get experience in the characters that unlocks new cards, as well as general experience that unlocks new items. You also collect pages as you go, a currency you can spend on a tree of upgrades, unlocks, and permanent bonuses for future runs. In those future runs you'll take on challenges that make you do things like take every new card you

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A deck-building roguelike set in a magical storybook

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Abrakam Entertainment SA

PUBLISHER
Nacon

REVIEWED ON
TK

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
roguebook.net

find, or that drastically increase the cost of items in the mid-run shop.

A new run is a chance to experiment with a combo of two characters. Sharra's fast and aggressive, but relatively fragile when you can't manage her tricks to avoid damage. There's Sorocco, an ogre whose deck is all about shrugging off hits while you wind up a giant punch. Seifer's a weird one, a pain-fuelled wolf whose all-out offensives are backed up by demon allies. Finally there's Aurora, an awesome deck design that's fragile on the face of it but can turn clever cardplay into a stream of healing that becomes damage as she overheals.

Roguebook's most interesting twist is its gems, which you pick up mid-run and place in sockets on your cards. They provide an upgrade to whatever card they're slotted into, mostly mundane buffs like +3 damage or -1 cost, but also some more exotic ones – like making that card always show up in your starting hand. Unfortunately, they're feast or famine. Some runs you barely find any.

See, getting new stuff is based on exploration, which is based on revealing map hexes. There's some strategy to that – using your ink pots and brushes you can puzzle out how to reach the things on the map. But you can never reveal the whole map, and you can really just... get unlucky. Sometimes you don't get enough cards, or gems, or gold, or items.

It's emblematic of *Roguebook* as a whole. The mechanics largely work, and when they're running smooth they're a joy. But games like this have to rely on being tightly designed or else provide so much fun content that you won't care otherwise. *Roguebook* doesn't quite hit either. ■

MAKE YOUR OWN STORY

The 'embellishments' tree is key to progression – here's what to unlock first



FAERIA WELLS
These give you a boost of energy in the first rounds of combat. A must-have.



MORE MINING
More gemstones hidden means more gemstones to find and collect.



ALCHEMY
Alchemist transformation is the best way to get rid of bad starter cards.



EXPERT TALENTS
Unlocking new talents is a big reward for building up the size of your deck.

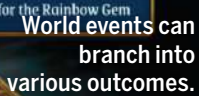


BONUS GEM
Starting with some gems is a massive leg up when you're in the early game.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Roguebook stands out from the pack on a few qualities, but unfortunately it's not a must-play game.

78

[illegible]

BELOW LEFT: Boss battles punish over-reliance on certain strategies.



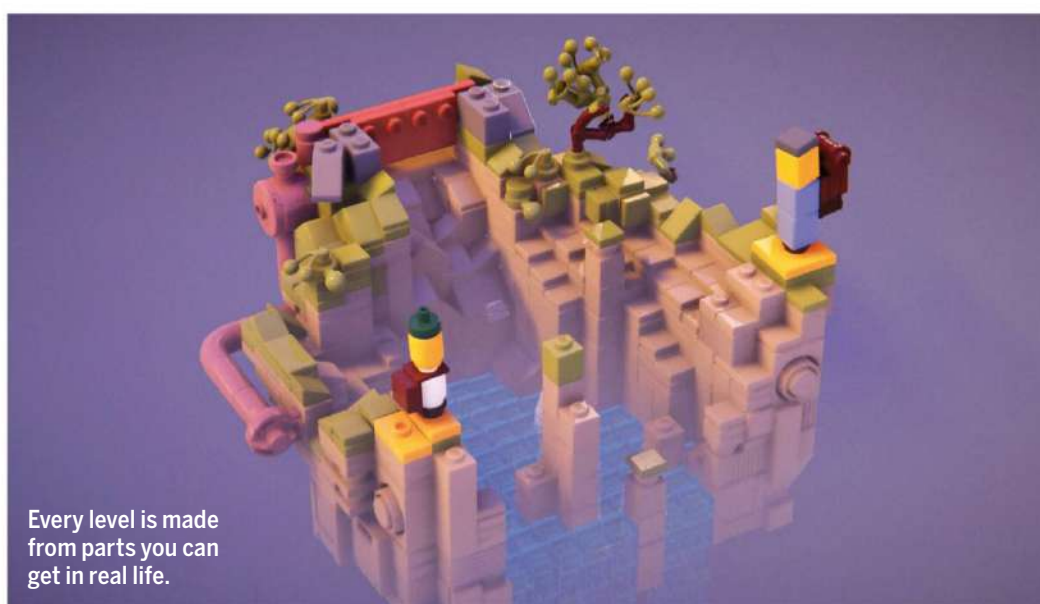
BELOW: The Faeria world's enemies come in all kinds of weird shapes.





ABOVE: As long as you had fun making it, that's all that matters.

RIGHT: Beautiful lighting brings dioramas to life.



Every level is made from parts you can get in real life.



All the fun of Lego, with none of the tidying up!

LEGO ISLANDS

LEGO BUILDER'S JOURNEY captures the joy of those little plastic bricks

By Alistair Jones

When I was little, I had a crate of Lego pieces. Once new sets had been built and enjoyed, they were dismantled to become more fuel for the crate, a seemingly bottomless well of colourful, constructive opportunity from which entire worlds could spill forth. Lego has been incorporated into dozens of games since the mid-1990s, but none of them bring the magic of my crate to life like *Lego Builder's Journey*.

Each of the dioramas that make up *Lego Builder's Journey* is shaped by a single goal – to bring your character from one side of the level to the other. There is, however, no prescribed solution to any puzzle. In true Lego style, you're free to use the blocks provided any way you like. It's often an iterative process, but one with no fail states or wrong answers. Your solution needn't be elegant or efficient. If the pieces fit together, there will be some kind of way forward.

The pieces themselves handle in a way almost as satisfying as the real thing, snapping into place or rattling against each other as you comb through them. It's an amazingly tactile experience, bolstered by the incredible detail on offer in each diorama, all of which are created entirely from actual pieces.

Even the story, a simple narrative of parental responsibility and childish imagination, speaks to what Lego has always attempted to invoke. For the parent figure, play must be pushed aside for the monotony of work, while for the child, the wonders of the natural world make way for the wonders of their imagination. A robot companion comes to life, turning the browns and greens of dioramas inspired by hiking trails and remote campsites into the vibrant primary colours of children's TV. A healthy dose of slapstick and childish naivety ensures *Lego Builder's Journey* never deviates too far from its toybox origins, but the dark, industrial nature of later levels means that its

more serious ideas land. While other Lego games lean on the bombast of massive crossovers, Light Brick Studios focuses on what it's actually like to play with those little coloured blocks. It's a subtle approach, but one that obfuscates the game's limited scope, capturing everything from the imaginative freedom that Lego offers to the feeling of handling each individual brick.

It focuses on what it's actually like to play with those coloured blocks

STRUCTURAL DAMAGE

Across the levels that made up the original mobile version of *Lego*

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A puzzle game about building with Lego

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Light Brick Studio

PUBLISHER
Lego Games

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-5820K
CPU @ 3.30GHz, 8GB
RAM, Nvidia Geforce
950, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3h9KGyA

Builder's Journey, the game gently twists and turns, picking up ideas and dropping them again at will.

Throughout the earlier stages, the sandbox style persists, with the few levels in which there's a more defined solution often trying to highlight a specific theme. Limited perspectives lead to some issues with transparency, but the difficulty curve remains steady throughout, often relying on the complexity of the bricks you use rather than the puzzles themselves when it ramps up. When the original finale does arrive, it's an excellent capstone to story, theme and design.

Unfortunately, later levels maintain little sense of that gentle progression. Those included in this PC version but not available in the original release introduce a new approach. Rather than use complete bricks, these puzzles allow you to stitch together fragments or duplicate the blocks you've already made, adding an unwelcome element of experimentation.

Within the beautiful environments and open-ended approach to puzzle solving, *Lego Builder's Journey* is perhaps the most authentic, earnest Lego game there's ever been. From the sense of freedom that a pile of bricks offers right down to the individual bricks between your fingers, it manages to recreate not just what Lego is, but what it can be. The attempt to build on its finely sculpted original outing is clumsy, sacrificing much of the open-ended approach that makes it so successful, but the way in which it captures with such care and attention something so beloved through its physicality and tactility, even in this virtual format, makes this a very special game. ■

BRICKING IT

A brief history of Lego games



PC GAMER VERDICT

Lego Builder's Journey from Light Brick Studios proves that while not everything is awesome, some stuff is quite good.

72

HEADS A POPPIN'

Infiltrate bases and turn skulls into jelly in **SNIPER: GHOST WARRIOR: CONTRACTS 2**

By Rick Lane

Clumsy titling aside, *Sniper: Ghost Warrior: Contracts 2* wastes no time getting to the good stuff. You're Raven, a killer-for-hire dispatched to the Middle Eastern state of Kuamar to prevent a war. Your target is Bibi Rashida, Kuamar's de-facto head-of-state after her husband was assassinated. Rashida's military response threatens to destabilise the regions and cripple Western economies. Your job is to clean this up by taking out Rashida herself.

All this is communicated in a direct, matter-of-fact briefing that encapsulates *Contracts 2*'s pragmatic, no-nonsense design. Having gradually refined *Ghost Warrior* over five games, CI Games clearly understands the experience it wants to create. *Contracts 2* delivers it with a quiet confidence that I thoroughly appreciated.

Your efforts to dismantle Rashida's regime is spread across five missions so big they're referred to in-game as 'Regions'. These vast expanses of terrain include multiple objectives and various paths between them. Some locations you visit, such as a giant medieval castle that has both an inner and outer fort, would form the entire level of any other game.

Contracts 2's missions are divided into two categories. 'Classic' contracts are familiar infiltration affairs, where you use a combination of sniping and stealth to sneak into locations to assassinate targets and sabotage equipment. But newly introduced to

Contracts 2 are 'Long Shot' contracts. These involve slipping through guard patrols to reach designated Overlook positions, lofty perches from which you snipe at targets over a mile away.

Each long-shot objective is an elaborate sniping puzzle where you use your sharpshooting skills to manipulate both enemies and the environment. An early example requires you to assassinate a target located at a solar farm, but the target is hiding inside

Each long-shot objective is an elaborate sniping puzzle

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A sniper stealth game with massive, open-ended levels

EXPECT TO PAY

£35

DEVELOPER

CI Games

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

AMD Ryzen 5 3600, Nvidia GeForce 2080 Super, 32 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

sniperghostwarriorcontracts2.com

the farm's main building. To draw them out, you must disable the farm by shooting the control panels enabling it to harvest electricity. Doing this without raising the alarm also requires you to carefully eliminate the guards patrolling the facility, prising them apart with distractions, and lining up shots to kill multiple guards at once.

LEGALLY BINDING

The puzzle-like structure of these missions elevates *Contracts 2* beyond a simple head-popping simulator. *Contracts 2*'s blend of classic and long-shot missions helps fix a problem *Ghost Warrior* has struggled with for a while. Sniping in and of itself can get repetitive quickly, but physically infiltrating bases is the opposite of how a sniper operates. By combining *Splinter Cell*-like stealth missions with long-range shooting puzzles, *Ghost Warrior* can have its cake and eat it, providing both elaborate sniping challenges and all the dynamism and gadgetry that stealth gaming offers.

The excellent presentation extends to the writing and voice acting. *Contracts 2* isn't an exercise in



TOP: Infiltrating Hellstrom's Citadel is arguably the highlight of the game.

ABOVE: Stealth is functional, if familiar.



Contracts 2 isn't quite as gratuitous as *Sniper Elite*, but still...



ABOVE: Guards can be pulled away by shooting objects like fuse boxes.



jingoistic self-aggrandisement like *Call of Duty* has become. Rather, it takes a cold, pragmatic, and darkly satirical view of contract killing and deniable military intervention in the Middle East.

While *Contracts 2* is undoubtedly the slickest *Ghost Warrior* game yet, there are a few lingering idiosyncrasies, particularly within the save system and enemy AI. Regarding the former, *Contracts 2* employs an autosave system that disables itself when you're either in combat or close to an enemy. It's an unnecessarily convoluted system that could be easily avoided by simply letting players quicksave. As for the AI, it needs a secondary state between 'passive' and 'every guard in the area knowing exactly where you are'. Stealth games are always more fun when they give you a chance to correct a mistake.

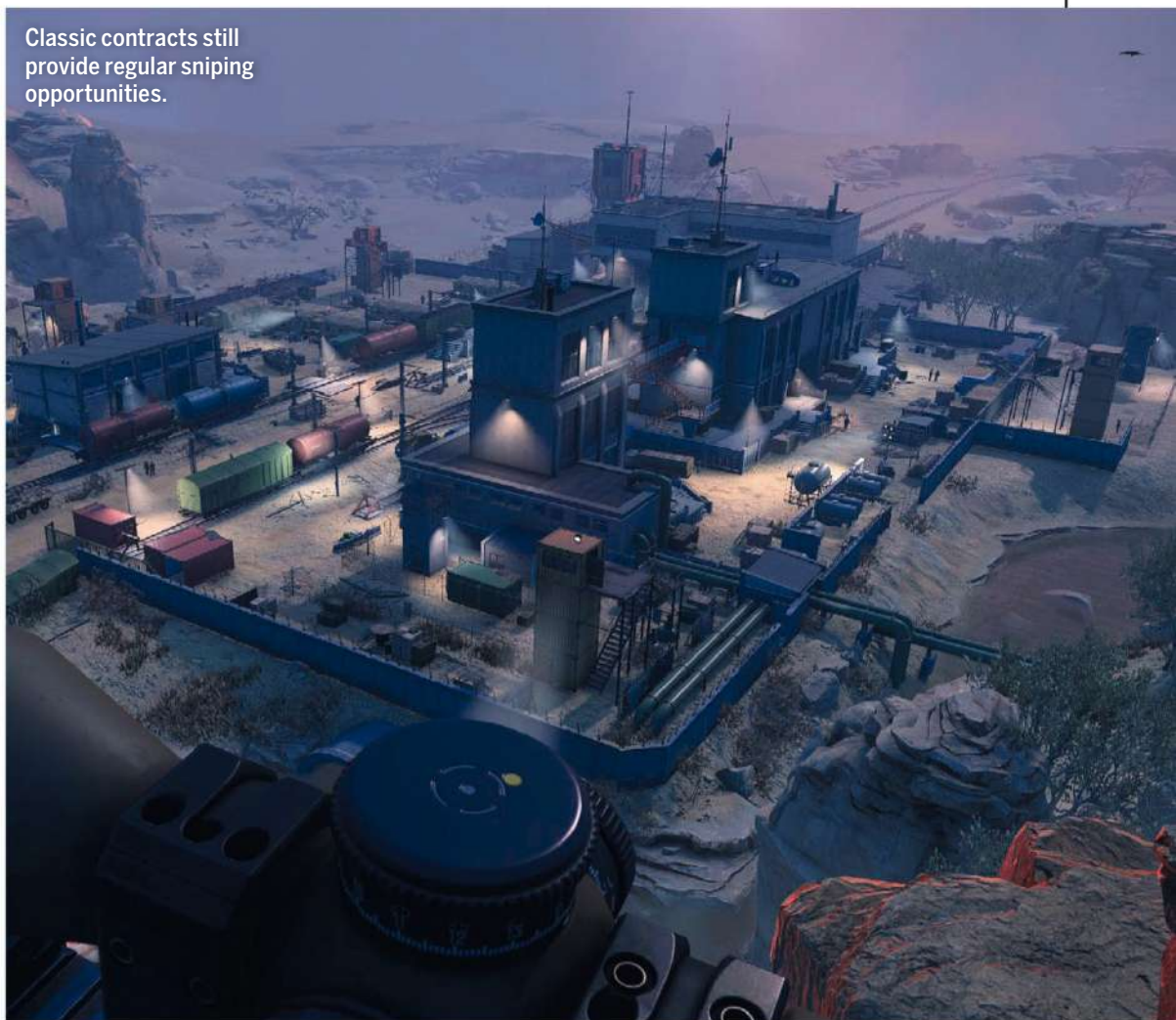
These issues aside, I'm impressed by *Contracts 2*. I like its approach to executing its design, that it doesn't get distracted by tacking on a multiplayer mode or adding a loot system. The maps are fantastic and the sniping is great. A perfectly enjoyable stealth sandbox. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Blending classic stealth mechanics with puzzle-y sniping, *Sniper: Ghost Warrior: Contracts 2* gets the job done.

80

Classic contracts still provide regular sniping opportunities.



GADGET MAN

Contracts 2's best hi-tech tools



MASK
Scans environments to make pathways visible even in darkness. Can be upgraded with thermal vision.



DRONE
Useful for tagging enemies, can also hack surveillance cameras and fire poison darts at enemies.



SNIPER TURRET
Tags and shoots enemies on command, useful for setting up chain kills and synchronised shots.



DECLOY TRAP
Not quite The World's Most Interesting Bomb, but it lures enemies to its location and can fire poison-gas clouds.

FUN WITH PORTALS

WORLD OF WARCRAFT: THE BURNING CRUSADE CLASSIC is still great, but the grind is real

By Steven Messner

It's uncanny how much *World of Warcraft Classic* still feels like a wormhole to a bygone era of gaming. I was certain that the magic of its 2019 launch would have dissipated, but was wrong. I joined a group of strangers to take on one of the new dungeons and what should've been a twenty-minute run turned into a four-hour marathon. When I slumped into bed at 3am, I didn't just have some new loot for my undead Warlock, but a whole new guild of friends to play with.

That's the enduring black magic of *Burning Crusade Classic*, a free expansion to *WoW Classic* servers that fully recreates the first expansion, originally released back in 2007. It's a crucible of soul-crushing grinding and unforgiving combat that smashes players together like atoms, sparking chain reactions that forge new friendships with impressive regularity.

But sustaining those ongoing reactions requires an unfathomable sacrifice of time and energy that makes my heart yearn for the years when I was a teenager with all the time in the world. *Burning Crusade Classic* is awesome, but you'll have to give up a significant chunk of your life to experience all of it.

It's fun to return to this antiquated version of *Warcraft*

When I first reviewed *WoW Classic* in 2019, much of what made it an easy game to recommend was how accessible it was. For just the price of a monthly subscription fee, anyone could start a new character and be transported back to the dawn of Blizzard's foundational MMO. Not so with *Burning Crusade Classic*.

To even explore the seven new zones, you'll need a level 58 character that will take casual players months of questing to get. Or you can pay \$35 for a ridiculously overpriced, one-time level boost that supplies you with trash-tier equipment and a pittance of gold that'll barely help you survive your first few quests in Outlands. It sucks that these daunting entry

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A set of servers that recreate *World of Warcraft: Burning Crusade* in 2007

EXPECT TO PAY

\$15/month (included for free in a regular *WoW* subscription)

DEVELOPER

Blizzard Entertainment

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

i7-7700, Nvidia RTX 2070, 16 GB RAM, 500GB SSD

MULTIPLAYER

MMO

LINK

worldofwarcraft.com

requirements will inevitably turn so many people away, because *Burning Crusade Classic* is special.

It's fun to return to this antiquated version of *Warcraft* and discover so many facets that have remained timeless and fun – and commiserate about those that aren't. Seeing that colossal Fel Reaver stomping across the blood-red fields of Hellfire Peninsula, murdering any player who ventures too close, is still cool as hell. But I could definitely do without waiting five minutes for a specific monster to respawn because someone killed it seconds before I got there. This languid pace will butcher the resolve of anyone used to more modern MMOs where levelling is just the free bread you pick at before your meal arrives. Those who can adapt to this now-ancient approach to MMOs will find a lot to enjoy, though.

OUTLANDER

Burning Crusade Classic takes nothing for granted and makes even the smallest achievements feel monumental. There's a reason why nearby players stop to congratulate me when I level up, or when a piece



TOP: Prepare for none of your armour to match.

ABOVE: Levelling is a grind, but exploring Outland is a blast.



Stepping through the Dark Portal over a decade later is a trip.



ABOVE: Dungeons require careful coordination and patience.

of gear drops in a dungeon my party chatters excitedly if it's a big upgrade for one player. This isn't a game you play, it's an ordeal you overcome – one that binds players together through adversity and pain. Kids born of the *Dark Souls* generation telling one another to 'git gud' seem cute by comparison. Try enduring another five-minute run back to your corpse because Fen Rays in The Underbog feared your tank straight into two other groups of monsters for the fifth time. Zug zug, bitches.

Nowadays grinding has become a dirty word in games, but in *Burning Crusade Classic* it was a badge of honour. And even though I've had moments where I've felt frustrated or bored, my patience is reset every time I have a cool encounter with another player. Twice now I've sat with another player waiting for a quest objective to respawn and been drawn into a conversation that led to us joining forces for a few hours. The sense of being one small piece of a greater community is enchanting.

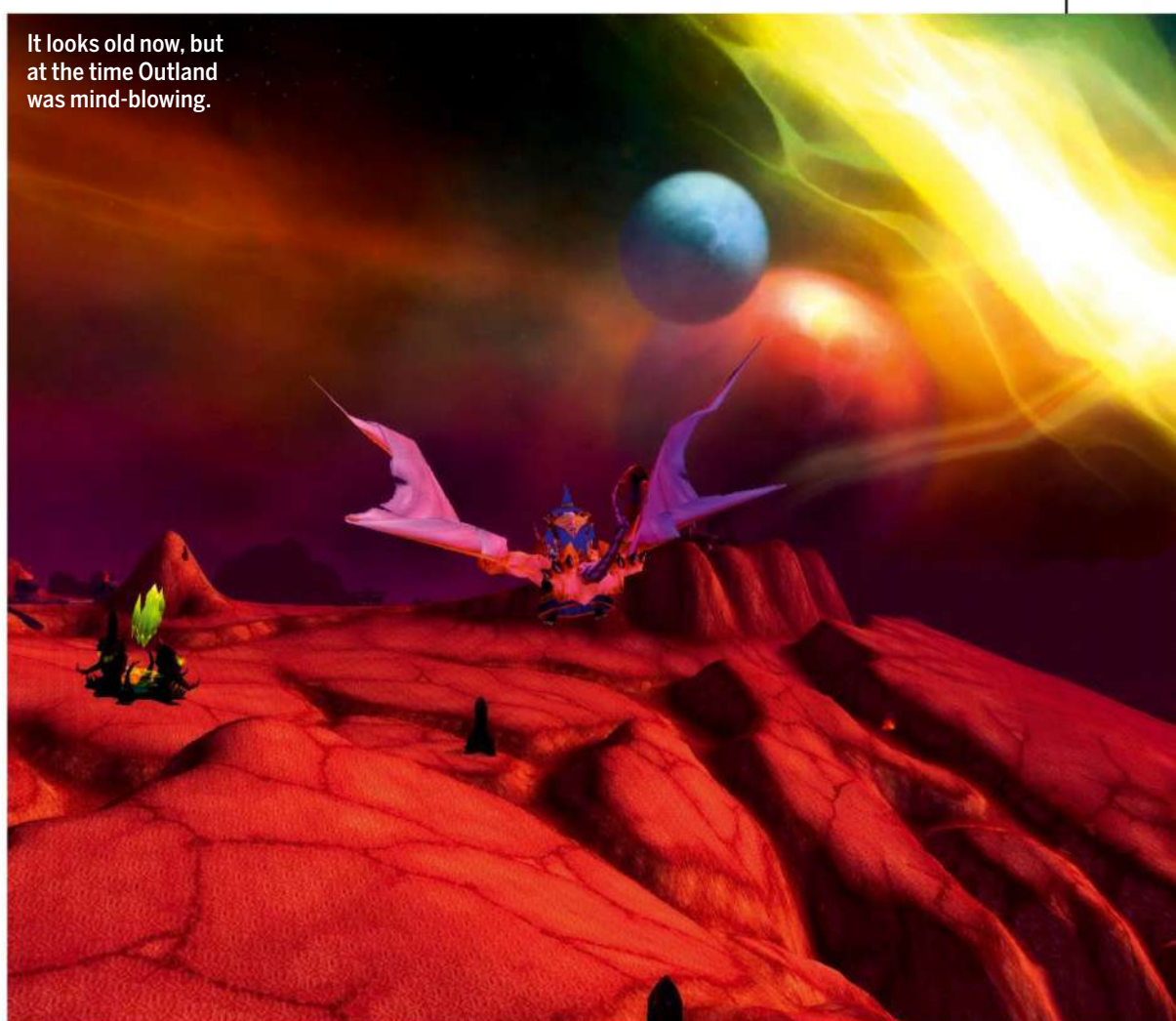
World of Warcraft: Burning Crusade Classic is badass and uncompromising – more than *WoW Classic* ever was. Most of you can safely give this a pass and enjoy all the extra time you'll have for other games, friends, family, and hobbies. But for *WoW Classic*'s devoted community, this is *World of Warcraft* beginning its transformation into the MMO that took over the world. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Burning Crusade Classic's endless grind is brutal, but the way it fosters community is magical.

75

It looks old now, but at the time *Outland* was mind-blowing.



LEVELLING UP

The top new features added in Burning Crusade



BLOOD ELVES
The Horde finally gets its own brand of sexy elves. They're also the only Horde race that can become Paladins, a big deal for hardcore raiders.



DRAENEI
These otherworldly aliens join the Alliance and can also be Shamans, which used to be Horde-only and wreck in PvP.



JEWELCRAFTING
Gear gets a lot more interesting in *Burning Crusade* now that you can socket stat-enhancing gems into certain pieces to customise them.



FLYING MOUNTS
Flying mounts changed *WoW* forever, but getting one will cost you. The fastest flying mounts cost 5000g to unlock. Yowza!

MYTH IT, MYTH OUT

WILDERMYTH is a legend-building RPG that deserves to define the next decade

By Sin Vega

If you're interested in narrative-driven games, there's a theoretical game you've already dreamed about. An impossible fusion of deliberately crafted stories and pure systems-driven anecdotes that lend themselves to stories of your own like procedurally generated bricks. *Wilderness* is that game. It is real. And it is wonderful.

Campaigns start with a few randomised heroes. They're just a jumble of pieces, an old police composite. But soon, things will start to happen. They'll rescue a chicken while travelling. Your hunter will refuse to enter a village or explain why, and a prompt will ask if you want to press them. Two of them will form a rivalry, and get bonuses to their critical hit ('stunting', a far better term) chance as they one-up each other. Across multiple chapters, you'll explore a strategic map, scrubbing away gross monster vibes and fortifying areas. You'll restore cultural sites, and have side adventures.

And then someone dies. Except... not right away. When someone falls, you choose what happens. They could escape but lose a limb. Someone else could permanently injure herself to save her friend. Or you could let them die, but take something down with them. This sounds like a bad trade, but soon you'll do it, because it feels right.

At every step, there's a chance for a character vignette. Everything is contextualised by excellent micro-

stories that become an arc you co-author with the developers. And all the time, monsters grow stronger, and heroes age. Rushing to the end goal means the enemy gains fewer powers, but leaves the land infested, giving the world fewer years of peace.

I was too slow once, and failed a middle chapter. By the finale the world was saved, but permanently marred. Another group won 14 years of peace between chapters. Heroes

fell in love, took up painting, or wandered off into the night. One retired to become a judge, and was replaced by her friend's daughter.

Wilderness's difficulty ranges from soft drama to bloody,

desperate war, survived by using old hands to protect and teach the young ones. Items can't be redistributed, encouraging you to differentiate everyone over being efficient, and give good items to weaker members. Think like a hero who helps their youngers, not a tosser who hogs all the best gear. Levelling encourages diversity too, with one skill per level from partially randomised lists, and frankly you're playing it wrong if you're not choosing based on

Difficulty ranges from soft drama to bloody, desperate war

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A tactical RPG combining scripted and dynamic narratives to unique effect

EXPECT TO PAY
£19.50

DEVELOPER
Worldwalker Games LLC

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 PRO 3400G 3.70GHz / Radeon RX 590 / 24GB / SSD

MULTIPLAYER
Experimental co-op mode

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/763890/Wilderness

personalities. When Shay first levelled, she'd just lost her brother Uvwane, and took a healing skill over better magic. She doesn't want to lose someone like that again.

PASS IT ON

But Uvwane lives on. The dead or retired become 'legacy' heroes that a later group can recruit as an already-skilled youth. One campaign even started with one of my old B-listers. She'd never really got her time to shine, but now she's the leader of her own adventure pals. Imagine in-world villagers hearing these tales, their details becoming jumbled in the retelling. You're creating your own mythology.

It has tactical chops too. Every story beat can affect combat. Each weapon type, each skill, whether or not you dipped your hand in that strange fountain, everything changes what a person does on the battlefield. Combining skills is rewarding, and a major challenge at higher difficulties. The magic is worth a whole article; mystics fight by 'interfusing' with scenery. Borrow stone from an archway to protect your archer. Blind enemies with lampflares. Interfuse with trees and explode them at a crowd so your maceman can lunge in, your archer burning the survivors with the power she inherited from an old shrine last year.

Wilderness has frustrating parts. Campaigns and battles too easily reach a point of no hope. Chapter finales border on trial and error. Battles give no control over starting placement. It desperately needs an order confirmation option. But I am utterly in love with *Wilderness*. It's a magnificent step forward for RPG design and everyone should try it. ■

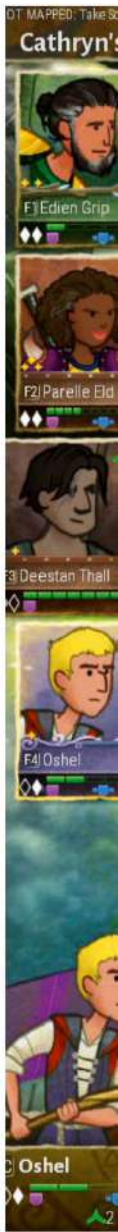
PC GAMER VERDICT

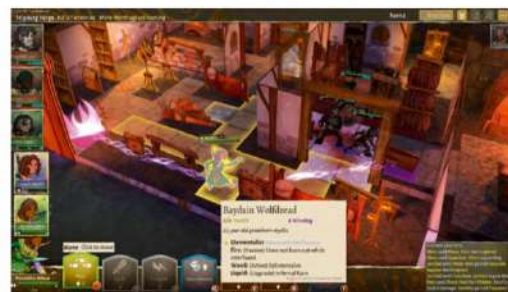
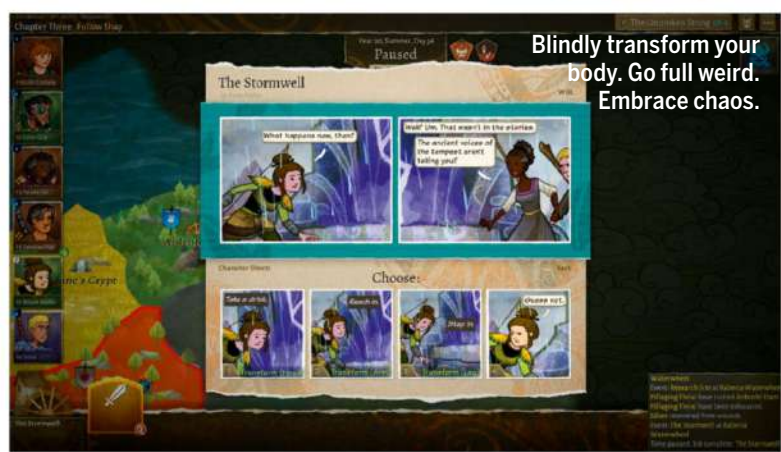
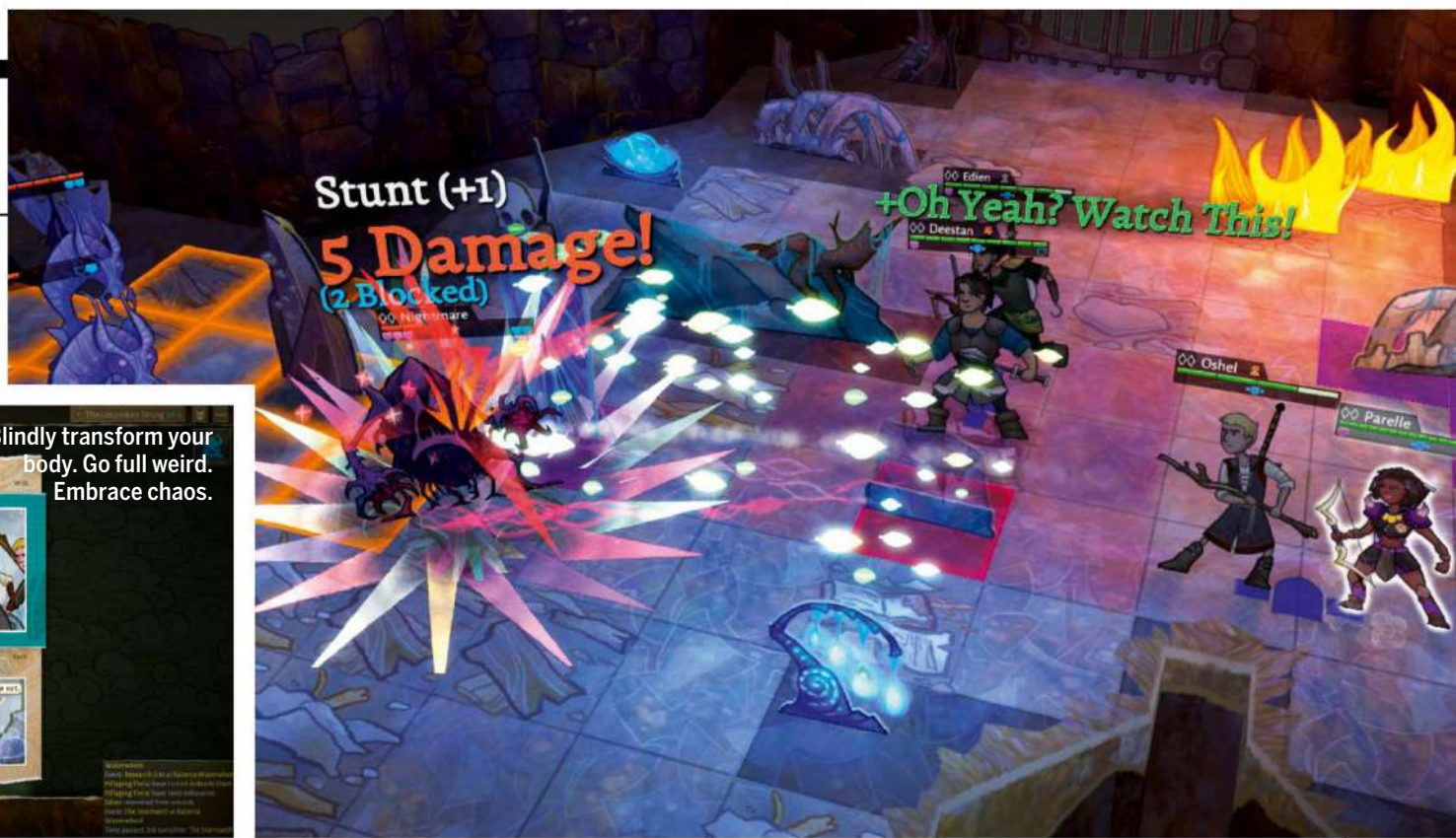
I've played thousands of games, but I've found that *Wilderness* is almost my favourite. Play it, you cowards.

90

- 1** Defeated a demigod by smacking him in his big stupid Lunantha-underestimating FACE.
- 2** Married Kest Higgs and adopted a son who became her main rival. Healthy.
- 3** Cut off her arm to escape a Morthagi trap, then retired early to write about it.
- 4** Stabbed by Shay Brave, while defending Shay Brave from a Thrill that, turns out, could mind control Shay Brave.
- 5** Survived three corrupting apocalypses only to become the most loathsome monster of all: an early riser.

MULTIMYTH
The many fates of Lunantha



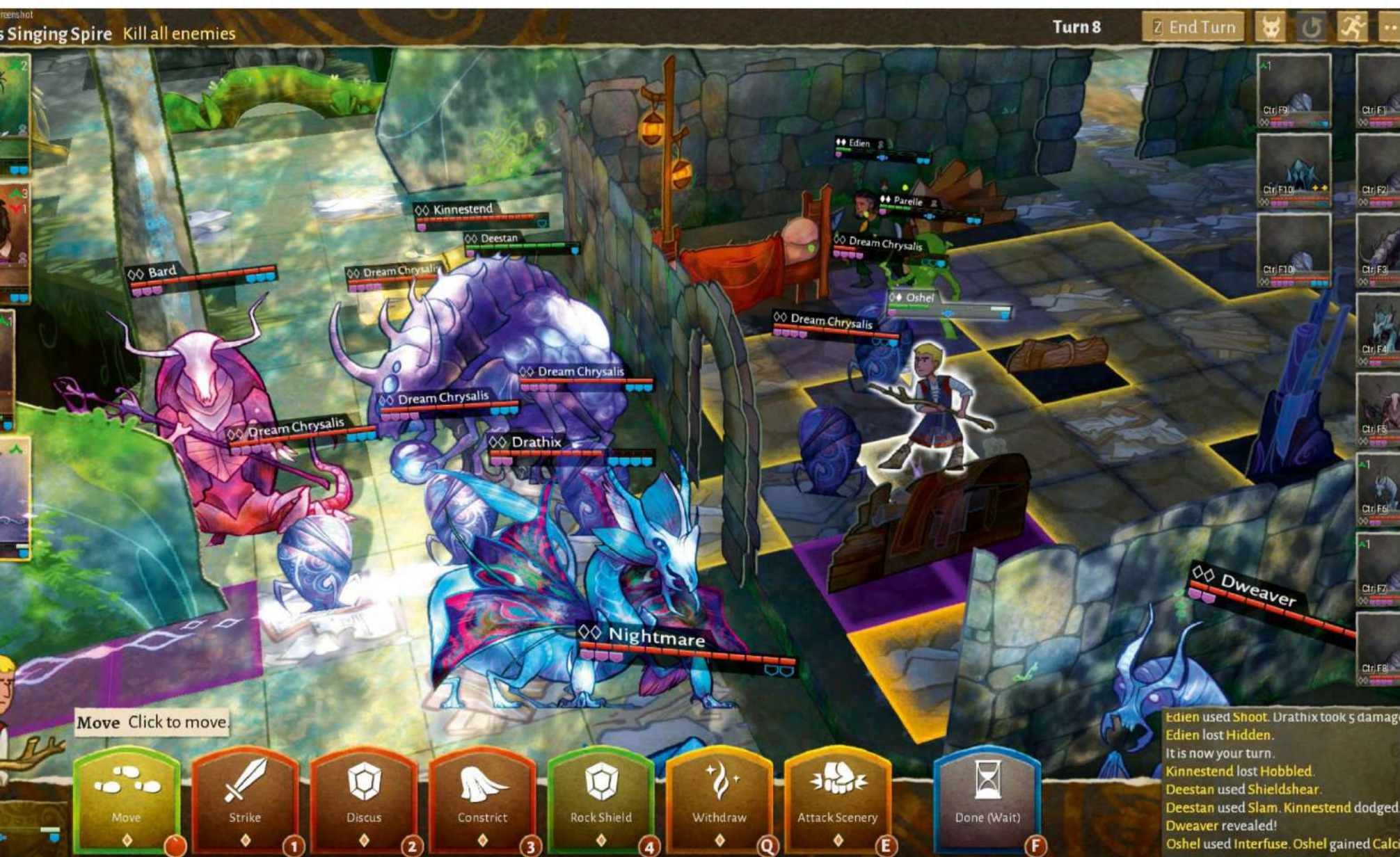


FAR LEFT: Unchecked monster incursions.

LEFT: Eleni survived some ludicrous risks. She deserves 'untouchable'.

LEFT: Baydsin's magic can burn enemies on two fronts.

BELOW: We keep telling you, Gary doesn't live here. Go away.



PSYCHOBABBLE

SCARLET NEXUS excellent combat system buffers a classically unhinged anime story

By Luke Winkie

Bandai Namco's latest original game aims high – this is an action-RPG hybrid festooned with *Devil May Cry*-like swordplay and *Monster Hunter* weak spot targeting, bottled up in an epic narrative that seems to explore a new high-concept sci-fi theme with every chapter. In the margins you'll find a *Persona*-ish relationship system, an interlocking network of psionic powers, and a boatload of frilly, cosmetic customisation options. It's a wonder how close it comes to pulling all of that off at once.

You take control of either Yuito Sumeragi or Kasane Randall, two young members of a paramilitary fighting force called the OSF. They're tasked with exterminating horrific, eldritch beings known only as The Others who are laying siege to our futuristic, mysterious, and slightly uncanny society. Both characters have their own full campaigns that crisscross at certain junkets, giving players a lot of content to chew through once they finish their initial trip through the plot. (Like many other games that have used this trick, such as *Nier: Automata* and, um, *Sonic Adventure 2*, there are plenty of lore-bombs hiding out in each of those crusades.)

Regardless of what perspective you choose, you'll start out by following orders and clearing out teeming pods of Others on the outskirts of human civilisation, before the story takes a darker, increasingly cryptic turn. Who

exactly are these creatures we're killing? What's in those shipments that keep leaving the metropolis?

Namco has generated an excellent combat system here

RED STATE

You will complete this investigation on a level-by-level basis. Yes, Yuito and Kasane can traipse around the map to loot overlooked corridors and uncover a few sidequests, but for the most part, your

time in *Scarlet Nexus* will be spent zoning into an area, killing a ton of bad guys, and enjoying the grave cutscenes that split up the setpieces. This isn't a problem, because Namco has generated an excellent combat system here. Both protagonists are psychokinetic, and by holding the right trigger you'll send whatever piece of debris is nearby hurling towards an enemy's face. Mix that in with your melee strikes, and you have an elementally satisfying mixture of acrobatics and violence that rivals *Ninja Gaiden*, *God of War*, or any other mid-2000s button-mash classic.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

An action-RPG with a bevy of psionic powers and a whole lot of dating sim trappings

EXPECT TO PAY

£40

DEVELOPER

Bandai Namco

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

Windows 10, GeForce GTX 1070, Intel Core i7-9700 CPU, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

bandainamcoent.com/games/scarlet-nexus

Scarlet Nexus never approaches the savant technique displayed by true *Bayonetta* lifers – there are hardly any combos to memorise or weapons to master – but it was flashy enough to sustain me till the final chapters.

Along the way, Yuiko and Kasane have access to their small travelling band of other psionic teens. Those accomplices aren't controlled directly, and honestly I found them to do pretty negligible damage overall, but they do play a vital role. The party has a diverse suite of supernatural expertise. Some are sclerokinetic, which grants invulnerability, or electrokinetic, or clairvoyant, and the player can tap into those skills at any time – which is kinda like popping a cooldown in an MMO. All of these effects can have a drastic impact on the combat; an Other in the distance shields its weak spot whenever I draw close, so I borrow my friend's teleportation ability to blink up into striking distance without the beast noticing. I fling a drum full of oil onto an enemy in the corner, and tap into an ally's pyrokinesis to set them on fire and score some lingering bonus damage. (Yes, there's a whole interlocking chain of status effects in *Scarlet Nexus*, yet another bit of circuitry that the game flirts with.)

Part of the appeal is how Namco nails a wonderfully grotesque design for the Others. They honestly have no parallel with any other archetypal bad guys I've ever witnessed. You know in *Katamari Damacy*, where you roll up a ball stuck with junk, where everything seems to be wiggling and struggling at once? That's kinda what the Others look like. Mutated flower pots, pestilent robotic sewer rats, a horrible monstrosity equipped with a squeaky water-pump hand-crank that they use to douse everyone with water. It needs to be seen to be believed. Do not be fooled by *Scarlet Nexus*' standard Funimation exterior; this videogame takes some serious swings with its art.

MIND OVER MATTER

Some of these powers would be pretty handy in real life



CLAIRVOYANCE

See the future, even if you don't like the look of it.



ELECTROKINESIS

Never worry about a dead car battery again!



PYROKINESIS

Be the BBQ pitmaster of your wildest dreams!





ABOVE: Some projectiles require a brief QTE to complete.

FAR LEFT: *Scarlet Nexus* gets the basics right. It's fun to throw a car at an enemy.



These are your two protagonists.



ABOVE: A visit to the shrine.



Scarlet Nexus' enemy design is truly unique.

RIGHT: Talking to the common folk.



FAR RIGHT: The coup d'etat feels really good.



Yuito
Yeah. He says Arahabaki was shut down and the defense system is down, too....

Most of *Scarlet Nexus*' story unfolds through these comic book panels.

Esc : Skip.

By the endgame I was firing off several psi blasts at once, before overloading Yuiko's own brain in order to shell my opponents with massive chunks of dark shrapnel. One of my favourite ideas that *Scarlet Nexus* eventually weaves in is a 'brain crush' bar that appears below the health meters of the Others. It works similar to *Sekiro*'s posture system; wear down the enemy with a combination of psychic and physical strikes, and the protagonist can unleash a devastating coup d'état that renders their remaining HP completely obsolete. The animations are brutal and pure anime, the sort of stuff that could be edited together in a single blood-soaked YouTube video like *Mortal Kombat* fatalities. An action game ought to let the player feel like a god once they've gone down the talent trees, and Bandai Namco passes that test with flying colours.

BRAIN OVERDRIVE

In the interim moments, where you're not decapitating Others and experimenting with all your spooky, death-dealing powers, Yuiko and Kasane spend a lot of time consoling the damaged souls in their platoon. *Scarlet Nexus* doesn't move in quasi real-time like *Persona*, but the game does pause at certain junctures in the narrative for a brief cooldown period. There, you can give gifts to your crewmates and embark on brief 'bond episodes' where you learn a little bit more about them. Those episodes usually reward the player with a boost in their relationship with that NPC, which allows them to be a little more savvy in your party. (At one friendship tier, I could summon a chummy teammate into an encounter for a brief onslaught, almost like tagging in a *Marvel vs Capcom* character.) These subplots are generally pretty good, and they help fill out the extremely dense fiction that *Scarlet Nexus* wants to establish. In particular, I was taken by Tsugumi, a young clairvoyant who confided some deep trauma with me on one of the first times we hung out. After all, if you've been able to see the future since you were a baby, there's no telling what horrors you might accidentally witness.

Generally though, I wish *Scarlet Nexus* diversified some of those

outings a little better. You're almost always hanging out with your comrades at the exact same restaurant, and the plot beats are uniformly focused on a slow interrogation of the manifold injustices that comes with being a high school-aged supersoldier. What makes *Persona* great is how weird and wonderful those journeys can be.

One day you might be tending to a drunk journalist in the bar, the next you're campaigning for a Bernie Sanders stand-in outside of Shibuya Crossing. *Scarlet Nexus*, on the other hand, uses most

of these engagements to lay on an extra veneer of exposition that the developers couldn't fit in the primary storyline, which is certainly valuable, but I didn't feel like I got to know my battalion as well as I would've liked.

Honestly, that same issue pervades through the rest of *Scarlet Nexus*' trimmings. This is a very big game that's been forced into a small box. The setting is striking: an uneasy, *Shadowrun*-ish realm, defended by a military who are augmented with cybernetic tech that lets them leverage their brains as ammunition, holding the line against these grotesque demons who are desperate to purge humanity from the streets. If *Scarlet Nexus* only wanted to tell that

This is a very big game that's been forced into a small box



story, it would probably be much more successful.

Instead, we quickly deviate to body horror, to government censorship, to the enigma of pink matter, to standard-issue, Looper-style time travel paradoxes. By the time the fifth or sixth monkey wrench was thrown into Namco's story, and it became clear that they weren't going to follow any one of those fascinating hooks to a gratifying conclusion, I started to check out. Honestly, it feels like every 30 minutes of gameplay is broken up by a lengthy lecture peeling back yet another layer of what's really going on here. But those reveals never hit me emotionally, perhaps because I knew that in the next chapter, a brand new monologue would overwrite everything I just heard.

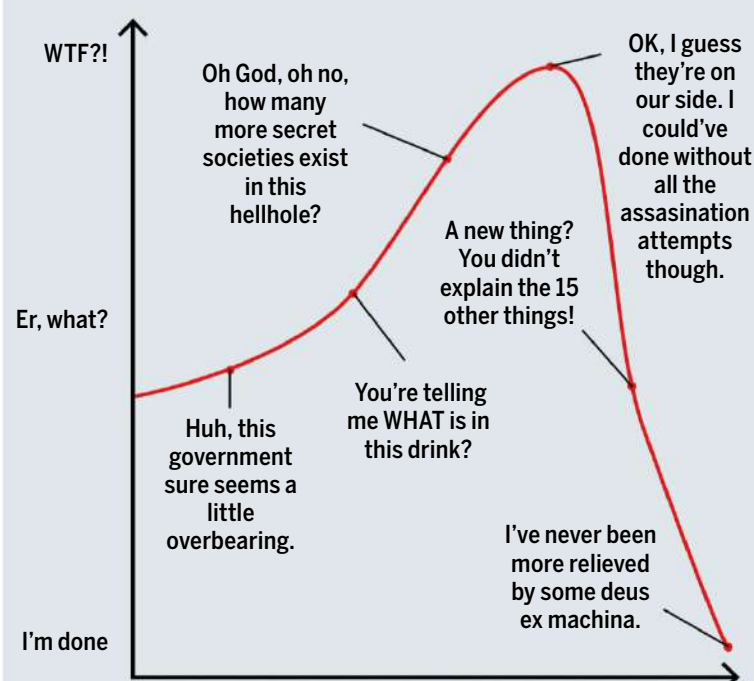
POP UP

The same goes for *Scarlet Nexus*' overworld, which is beautifully rendered in fineline anime style, and is equipped with a sublime J-Pop jingle. (The music, across the board, is fantastic.) Unfortunately, the downtown hub is just a couple of blocks, and the game has a frustrating desire to reuse old level layouts for new missions. A cardinal sin! The sidequests are also pretty laughable; you basically talk to a random bystander on the street and they ask you to go kill an Other archetype in a specific way. Your reward is rarely anything more than a health potion. *Scarlet Nexus*' creative team were clearly out to establish a bold new franchise, but the scale they were working with let them down.

But frankly, that gives me hope for the future. If *Scarlet Nexus* earns a sequel – if the next time I traipse down a Comic-Con hall I see dozens of teens dressed for cybernetic warfare – then I think the team at Namco will really iron out the kinks in the second go around. A larger, more interactive universe, some juicier off-the-main-path content, maybe a few new environments for our languid, afternoon friendship outings. It's all so easy to imagine. For now, *Scarlet Nexus* is a great promise and a good game. ■

SHYAMALANIAN

My reaction to Scarlet Nexus' twists over time



PC GAMER VERDICT

Scarlet Nexus is one of the most ambitious games of the year, but it's probably not the most successful one.

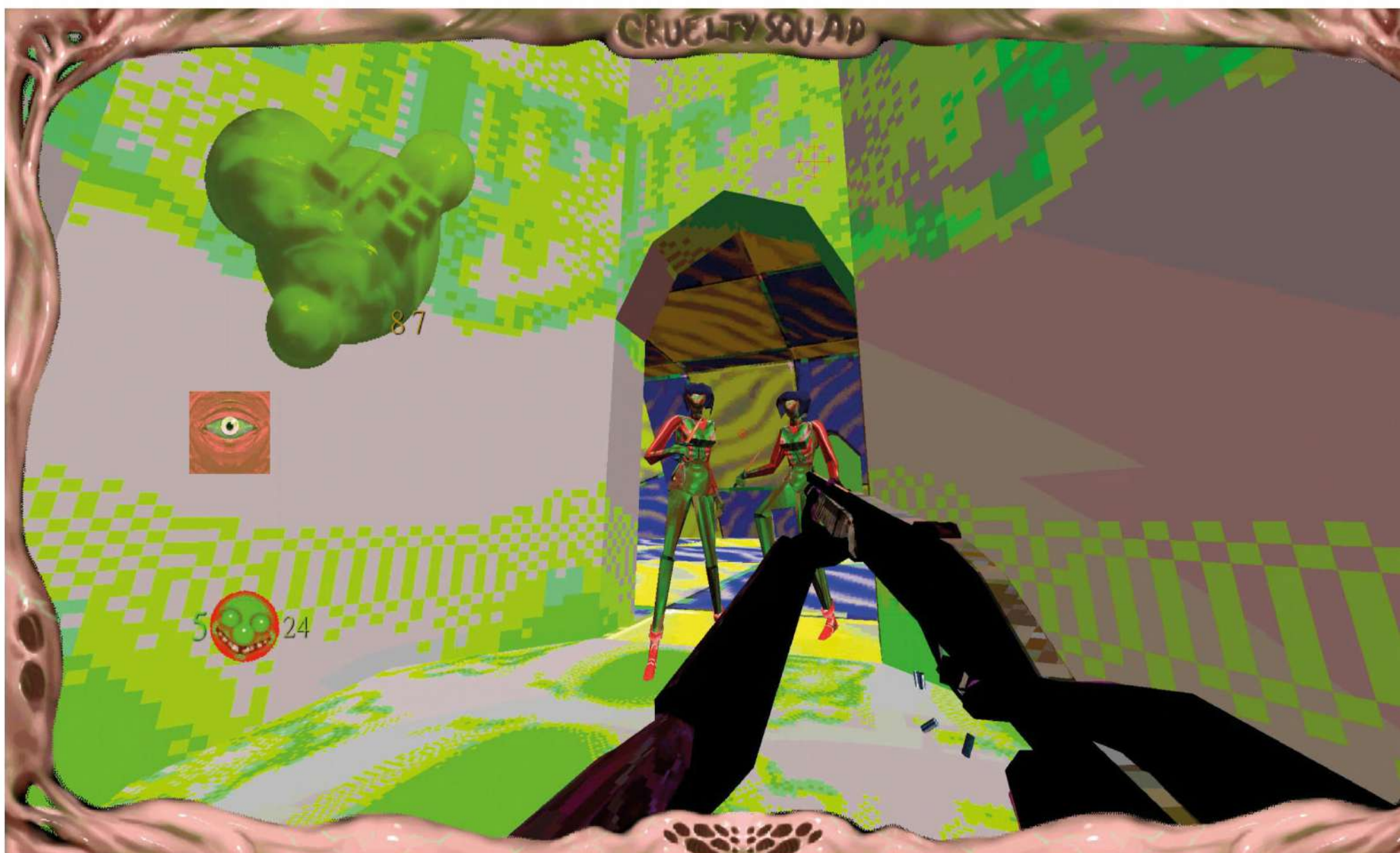
78



ABOVE: Ah, a nice depression shower.

RIGHT: The menus make sense with some patience.

BELOW: Don't bring a knife to a gun fight.



THOUGHTLINE MIAMI

CRUELTY SQUAD, the reanimated corpse of a great immersive sim

By James Davenport

Just looking at *Cruelty Squad* can make you queasy, but it passes the most essential immersive sim tests with bright, nauseating colours. I used classic vent routes to stealthily assassinate a bouncy castle made of flesh one playthrough, switching to a rocket launcher and using my guts as a grappling hook for a more direct approach the next. I stacked barrels to climb over entire buildings, and picked off targets with sniper shots from across the map.

Cruelty Squad is *Deus Ex* if it were made today, the natural product of furious people exhausted by wealth inequality, police militarisation, and the stubborn structures that keep humanity rolling towards total annihilation of the soul.

But *Cruelty Squad* wants to have fun before the end. It's a stealth action game that props up the joy of feeling like I outsmarted the designers through wild experimentation, a cathartic exercise in taking out the worst people alive, and one of the most brilliantly absurd games I've played.

You're a depressed assassin for hire in the bad future. Pick out some guns and tools, then explore a level, finding the best routes for a clean kill.

Kills grant you cash for body mods, from basic stuff like armour to juiced up legs that give you a higher jump. And whatever guns you find and finish the mission with are added to your arsenal, now available to take into any mission. It's a super rewarding track that lets you explore playstyles while casting replays of previous levels in a new light.

Memorising their layouts is a joy. I'm happy dying on repeat to find the perfect sniper nest or infiltration route. The influx of new tools, be it a DNA-scrambling pistol or nightmare goggles, keeps things fresh.

Death kicks you back to the start of a mission, but *Cruelty Squad* never loses momentum. You can harvest organs from corpses and catch fish to sell on the stock market, keeping the cash flowing and the new body mods

coming. There's even a gun with damage that scales to how much you have in holdings.

Cruelty Squad's spaces are easy to lose time in. I explored the same suburban

neighborhood five times before I found the city below. I stumbled into a few hidden levels, each more surreal than the last. *Cruelty Squad's* levels are so varied that it even turns into a

full-on horror game at times.

The art is a grotesque wonder, a vision of a world under intense stress. Faces shift beneath the polygons, the

You're a depressed assassin for hire in the bad future

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A psychedelic assassination nightmare

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Consumer Softproducts

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Nvidia RTX 3080, Intel i9-9900K, 30GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3qJNoPI

skies bleed, and the soundtrack underlines the dread like a Game Boy melting into scorching blacktop. *Cruelty Squad* is one of the most upsetting games ever and I adore its total dedication to alienation.

CRUEL INTENTIONS

Cruelty Squad's 20-plus weapons are fairly restrained. They have realistic handling, with significant recoil and spray that loses accuracy if you're peeking around corners, sustaining fire, or aiming from the hip. I'm partial to the New Safety M62 revolver, which has a lovely delay and subtle tilt animation to simulate the slow pull of a trigger.

Bizarrely, to reload you hold right-click and whip the mouse back. It feels great with time though, like shifting gears in a murderous man car. Reloading and retraining your aim before a guard turns and notices his dead pal behind him is a thrill.

That initial control shock also masks simple enemy AI. They just shoot on sight and pursue. A quick burst of concentrated fire can end you though, so clever AI isn't really the point. The point is sneaking into the centre of a hornet's nest to kill a sentient bouncy castle or a gross mayor, for example.

Once you know the layout, getting the better of the baddies is a little too simple. That's OK: *Cruelty Squad* transcends small problems with wild level design, the breadth of tools it gives me to explore them, and the perfect tension between fun and disgust it maintains throughout.

Cruelty Squad's world is sick and all by terrible, beautiful design. What's left is the skeleton of our favourite pastime: a computer game. And holy cow, it's a good one. ■

BIO-MOD BOD

The tools you'll take into the field



SKULLGUN

A gun in your skull. You take a point of damage for every shot, which sounds like fair penance.



BOUNCY SUIT

Fall damage is no more, but you are now a human bouncy ball. Expect to fly as high as you fall.



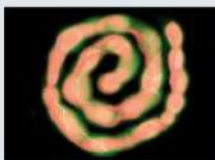
GUNKBOOSTERS

Goopy alien holes that allow you to fart your way up to greater heights in mid-air. Lovely!



LIFE SENSOR

See any living entity through walls, marked by a green dot, which is very helpful indeed.



GRAPPENDIX

Send out your guts as a grappling hook. Not particularly sanitary, but all that airtime is worth it.



AMMO GLAND

Auto reloading! Secrete it directly into your gun! It's natural, so you know it's healthy.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Cruelty Squad by Consumer Softproducts celebrates feeling bad in every way, all of them fun.

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GIANTS' CAUSEWAY

Helping big friendly giants in apocalyptic adventure game **MINUTE OF ISLANDS**

By Tom Sykes

Let's start with the obvious: *Minute of Islands* is a gorgeous game. It has that modern animation style featured in cartoons such as *Adventure Time*, and it's just as bursting with creativity. In this sidescrolling adventure, you'll explore an archipelago packed with memorable sights, including giants and a beached whale consumed by a fungus. Pretty much everything is rendered in a vivid yet sympathetic style. It's a beautiful world to explore.

You're exploring it as Mo, one of the last few stragglers who hasn't abandoned the islands. There's a spore-bound plague gradually destroying humanity, and the only creatures keeping it at bay lie within the islands. Those creatures are the Brothers: four benevolent giants who tirelessly stave off the spores by manually cranking massive purifying machines. I enjoyed every scrap of detail about these strange, heroic creatures, and the fleeting morsels of information about the wider world.

As the Brothers' chosen apprentice, Mo tends to the machines they've left strewn around. Instead of a spanner, she has her trusty Omni Switch, which you'll use to activate switches but also to point you to your goals, like the shining waypoint sword in *Shadow of the Colossus*.

Right from the start, Mo has a pressing mission: reach all four brothers and restore their life supports, after something goes wrong that grinds their labour to a halt. They're housed in dungeon-like chambers, but most of the game takes place outside, as you platform, natter, reminisce, and hallucinate, the last due to Mo's stubborn refusal to wear a mask. Yes, Mo is that numpty who leaves her nose exposed in a viral climate – just be thankful she's not standing behind you at Tesco.

While it features simple platforming elements, *Minute of Islands* is more of an adventure game, albeit one with no item management. Context-sensitive prompts allow you

to examine and interact, and chat with the other inhabitants, although there are no dialogue options so you can't influence conversations. This is a linear narrative, with an engrossing storybook quality, as every line, including the dialogue, is read by the narrator.

ISLAND LIVING

Thankfully, the narration is excellent, giving life to a sparing script that knows when

to hold back, when to slip in a bit of worldbuilding, and even when to tell the player what *others* think of Mo, for a telling moment. Overall, it's an

This is a linear narrative, with an engrossing storybook quality

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A sidescrolling adventure game set in a striking, hand-drawn apocalypse

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Studio Fizbin

PUBLISHER
Mixtvision

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H,
16GB RAM, GeForce
RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
minute-of-islands.com

affecting story that's as much about Mo as it is the fate of world: a young woman carrying a huge burden, who has isolated herself from her family.

The mental health parallels are there, naturally, but they're accomplished and mostly subtle: you're not punching shadowy depression monsters in the face. Crucially, *Minute* works on the surface level, as a story about people struggling in a dying civilisation. Its giants are no less tragic for being, on some level, metaphors.

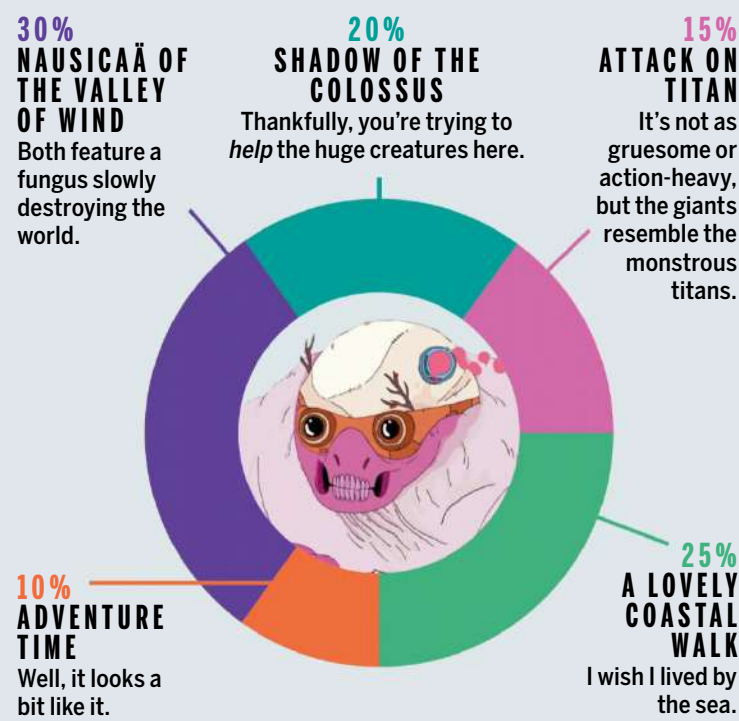
While it is a sumptuously hand-drawn setting, it can sometimes be difficult to decipher which parts of the world are just background detail, and which are the platforms you can walk on. *Uncharted*-style gull poo serves to highlight many important ledges, but I still felt increasingly disconnected from the world.

When you're not exploring, chatting, or grabbing collectibles in the form of story tidbits, you'll be solving simple puzzles. It makes sense, narratively, that much of your interaction is so workmanlike, as Mo is an engineer and we're meant to appreciate her drudging sacrifice, but I came to dread the tedious block-pushing and laser-dodging that lay in wait in each underground chamber. Thankfully, the game isn't long enough for this repetition to become *really* egregious.

It's not a perfectly told story, but the game resolves in a meaningful way that makes the journey feel worthwhile. Mo carries the weight of the world on her shoulders but *Minute* is smaller, quieter, and subtler than most apocalyptic games. Take a minute to play it – well OK, several hours – as it's an island chain worth visiting, deadly spores and all. ■

JUST A MINUTE

The influences that make up the game



PC GAMER VERDICT

There are better adventure games, but *Minute* tells a subtle, affecting story in a gorgeous world.

76



ABOVE: You'll revisit this whale and see the fungus take hold.

LEFT: Above ground, you're trying to reach scattered air purifiers.

BOTTOM: Fans of Nausicaä will feel at home in this fungal apocalypse.





Hockey players stop hitting each other to fight a common enemy.

BELOW: Bioterror Extreme is a relatively lengthy arcade shooter.



WONDERFUL

Reaching into a grab-bag of weird minigames in **POCKET WONDER SPORT**

I feel like *Pocket Wonder Sport* began with the question, *what if?* What if zombies invaded an ice hockey match? What if a robot entered a car race? What if you were swimming in a pool, but you were also playing *Breakout*? These are the sort of dumb ideas that would be crossed out on the way to the brainstorming session – but that doesn't mean they don't deserve to be made a reality.

A minigame collection might be the perfect medium in which to realise them. Here ideas are allowed to be slight, without having to bear the burden of a lengthy play session, or – in *Pocket Wonder's* case – a price tag. This ten-game collection takes you from undead hockey matches through to duelling toy grabbers and perilous acts of architecture. While some of the concepts might seem ludicrous, they've resulted in several novel minigames.

I'll tell you about some of the highlights. The wonderfully named *Dead Ice* plays like a refresh of *Pong*, only with slightly more cumbersome controls and, oh yeah, a steady stream of shambling zombies, which you whack into bits using your hockey stick. There isn't much more to it

than that, but it's a solid game of back-and-forth, with great art and animation. A strong start that sets the tone for the rest of the collection.

Pool Block, meanwhile, mixes *Breakout* with lane swimming, and it's a clever twist on the arcade

block-busting game. Here the paddle takes the form of a horizontal swimmer, while you generate extra balls by doing lengths of the pool. You decide your own play style, by adding as many balls as you think you can

handle, as the deadly blocks trickle relentlessly down the screen. It's smart, but, like the rest of games, it's missing something: there's no scoring system to record your best runs.

High scores, and multiplayer, would make these games come alive, giving you more motivation to replay

The wonderfully named *Dead Ice* plays like a refresh of *Pong*

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A collection of ten minigames that you can play in any order

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Harley Wilson

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H,
16GB RAM, GeForce
RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
bit.ly/pocketwonder

them, and to *keep* playing the ones that repeat endlessly. Games like *Pac-Man-meets-gardening* game, *Mighty Mower*, which almost feels like a cult NES game.

Pocket Wonder Sport is worth a play for these nuggets of what-if whimsy. For example: what if a transformer entered a car race, staying ahead of their rivals by using their robot form to punch them to smithereens? It's here, and a grin is surely inevitable as you turn from car to walking robot, stomp up to the other vehicles, and bash them till they explode in jets of flame.

There are further fun ideas like this one. Most are well realised, while others barely amount to anything.

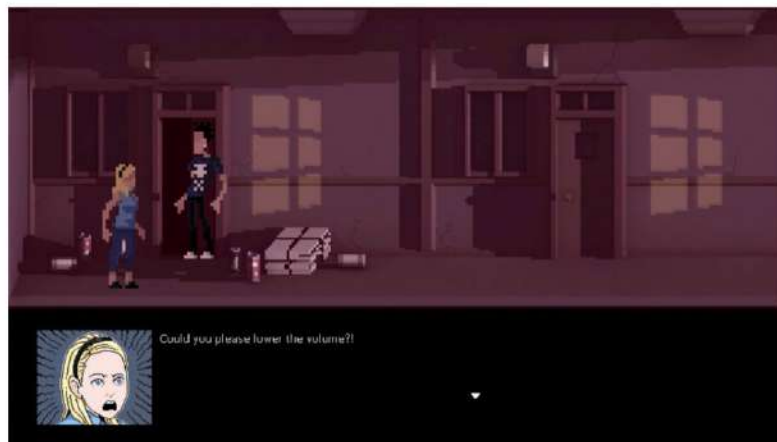
The lack of scoring and multiplayer is a bit perplexing. However, with games being so risk-averse these days, I'm just happy to see so many dumb ideas being brought to life. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Relive the days of lucky-dip game collections with this bundle of good games based on silly ideas.

79

BELOW: There are worse things than noise pollution in this building.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Broelbrak

LINK
broelbrak.itch.io

KNOCK KNOCK

Good neighbours become good monsters in **NEXTDOOR**

Many horror films and games tell us too much, diving into the backstory of the supernatural monster as our heroes seek a way to escape it. That makes dramatic sense, but it ruins the mystery. Far better to offer glimpses – surreal, unexplainable things – while stopping short of providing anything resembling an answer. That's how horror really gets under your skin.

Someone who's particularly great at this is mangaka Junji Ito, whose nightmarish manga short *The Woman Next Door* provides the basis for this slick fan adaptation.

Playing as a woman trying to study in her apartment one night, you're disturbed by the constant sound of loud music coming from the neighbour above. After setting out to confront the man, he deflects your

attention to the apartment next to his, where he has seen strange figures coming and going, but where no one seems to be in when you knock on the door. Over the next ten minutes or so, *Next Door* will tell you about those mysterious people. There are some great moments packed into such a compact game.

While the soundtrack is great, it's the artwork that does the heavy lifting here. Specifically, the animation frames of a creature, which moves in *unsettling* ways.

I'm being vague, but I don't want to ruin *Next Door* for you. It's short, but well-paced, and you can play it in your browser. There are no definitive answers for what's going on in that apartment, and the game is all the better for it, creating unsettling imagery that will linger in your mind for some time after. ■

81

FLIGHT TOUCH

TOWNSEEK is a chill, cheery trading game

Isuppose *Townseek* is a trading game, in that you'll need to trade goods to unlock everything, ferrying food and knick-knacks and odds and ends between settlements. Probably the main way it differs from games like *X4* and *Port Royale* is that you're flying a shark-shaped airship, while the towns you find are populated by talking animals.

Not just animals, but friendly henge-people too, hailing from the town of Stonehengeopolis, which offers decent deals on sketchbooks and 'jazzy tunes'. *Townseek* is set in a sweet, almost twee post-apocalypse, which you explore by flying your blimp across its shrunk-down version of Earth. In addition to the trading element, it's also partly a walking, er, floating sim, as there's no particular goal beyond exploring for exploring's

sake. You'll encounter things like a 'drooling volcano' and a 'polite whale' as you scour the world. The art is cute, although the narrative bits are insubstantial. If it wasn't for the collecting element, I might have stopped playing it.

You know the basics of trading: you buy low and sell high, and that's simple in *Townseek* thanks to the close proximity of towns, and the free items dotted round the world. I enjoyed discovering the things that were available for trade, and then fleshing out my journal.

You'll discover expensive items that may add motivation for building up your cash. There are different skins for your airship, and a fishing rod that lets you catch sellable fish. *Townseek* is a laid-back trading game that just wants you to hang out in its cosy world. ■

73

BELOW: You play as an explorer determined to see the world.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Whales And Games

LINK
whalesandgames.itch.io

THEY'RE BACK

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott

A weird dialogue option, considering I didn't find her.



- We should go talk to that clown.
- Good thing I found you in the sewers.
- It's an honor to work with you, Agent Ray.
- Well, I need to get back to solving this case.

VERBAL REMEDY

Mixed signals and missing punchlines in the otherwise brilliant **THIMBLEWEED PARK**

Friends sob quietly as they lower the coffin of your true love into the damp earth. Above the tears you hear the subsong of crows in the bare November trees. Dignified. Sombre. Then, you hear it. It's hard to parse at first. But soon, the rhythm and cadence become unmistakable: somebody is armpit-farting *Take Five* by the Dave Brubeck Quartet, here, at the funeral of your beloved. It's that wag *Thimbleweed Park*! *Parp-parp--paparp-parp!*

Thimbleweed Park makes jokes when you just want information. It makes jokes inside jokes inside jokes, like a turducken of mild amusement. It makes jokes when you're logging off because you've heard too many jokes. It's desperate to be loved, like a lonely widower listening for the rattle of your keys so they can step into the hallway for excruciating smalltalk. The point here is that sometimes, it's OK to express information or opinion without a punchline. See? That sentence didn't have a joke, and it was perfectly serviceable. Perhaps it's a quality/quantity thing. Withering sarcasm is fine, for instance, if it has a *purpose*. It should reveal character or story as well as being funny. Otherwise it's like

having prickliness without the hedgehog, which is a ghoulish thought I wish I hadn't written.

A good example is Ransome the clown. He's awful – a foul-mouthed bully whose cruelty leads to him getting cursed. But his stand-up set feels like the videogame equivalent of someone playing videogames in a movie. He's not telling jokes – he's pretending, like an actor holding the pad sideways and shouting

A foul-mouthed bully whose cruelty leads to him getting cursed

“Bam! Headshot!” while his sister plays *Firewatch* on PC. There's no setup. No punchline. Just swearing and snark. It wouldn't be worth mentioning, but so much *Thimbleweed Park* is built on these comedic foundations I expected more smiles, if not belly laughs.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Classic adventure constructed from unintentionally funny X-Files episodes

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Terrible Toybox

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CPU
@ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM,
NVIDIA GeForce GTX
1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/569860/Thimbleweed_Park/

Franklin the ghost, however, is an example of how good *Thimbleweed Park* can be when everything clicks. His interactions feel funny and imaginative, and it imbues the entire game world with a sense of intoxicating possibility. But the fact you have to endure hours with two flat lead characters and an infuriating sheriff speaks to the problems with *Thimbleweed's* pacing. Luckily, once the character switching starts to work and puzzles take over from tepid comedy, a fantastic adventure game reveals itself.

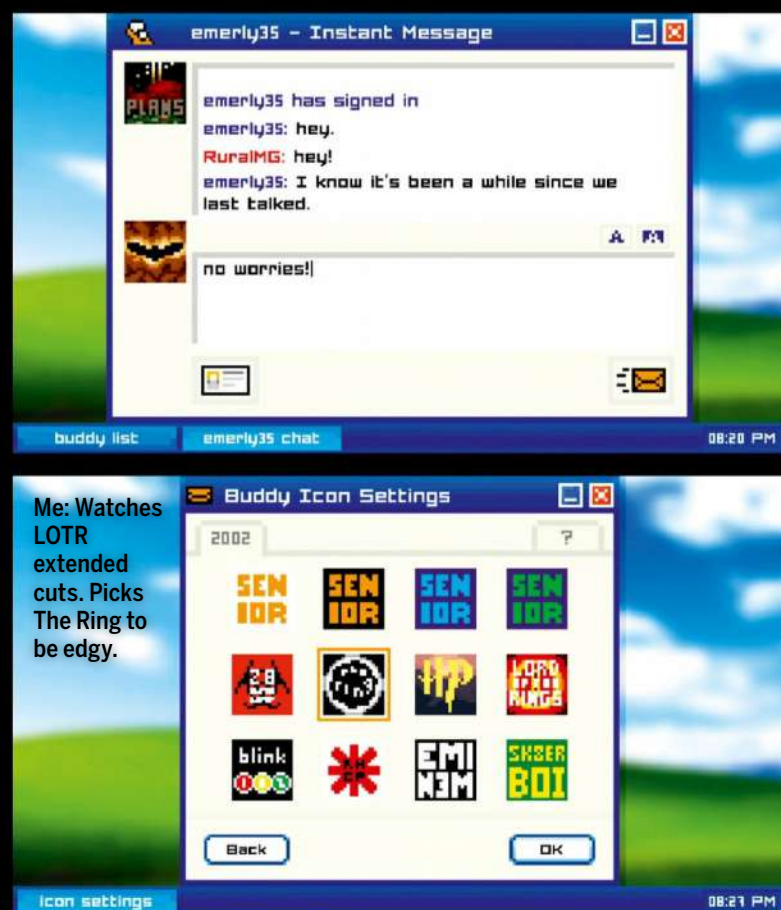
Every character has their own to-do list, too, which is an enormous help. It's not always clear *why* you need to get a BloodTron report or help some pigeons fix a fire hydrant, but, if anything, that makes the list more essential. The result is a game that makes up for its lack of charm with layered, edifying busywork. *parp-parp-parpedy-parp!* ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Thimbleweed Park is an engaging modern point-and-click game trying a little too hard to be loved.

73

BELOW: CARVE IT ON MY GRAVESTONE



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£7DEVELOPER
Kyle SeeleyPUBLISHER
In-house

DESKTOP BUDDY

EMILY IS AWAY tries to make me like Snow Patrol

It only takes until the login screen for *Emily is Away* to dredge up powerful, confusing memories. It's a mix of nostalgia and despair, like unearthing a time capsule and finally realising where your cat went. I decide to use the same name I did on my first AOL account: RuralMG.

Apparently I wanted people to think I was a white supremacist rapper at a livestock auction. In my defence, this was from a time when the internet came on discs attached to the Daily Mail, alongside your Princess Diana memorial scratchcard and illegal immigrant alarm whistle. In keeping with the self-loathing trip up my own backside, I decide to behave how I would have done in the noughties. Two messages in and I've already promised Emily I'll be there for her, under any circumstances. It's an

absurd commitment, but it's also Future Me's problem. I'm so concerned with winning her favour that I Google a Snow Patrol album just so I don't get a question 'wrong'. I just want you to reward my devotion, pretend internet woman. Such is the power of *Emily is Away*. I'm invested enough to spend as much time choosing buddy icons as I did naming my first child. When she breaks up with Brad I try to attract her with feigned sympathy. In the end, I pay the price for my insincerity. The final act of the game takes away my most powerful weapon – a grovelling apology – and instead I'm forced to sit back and despair as our conversation degenerates into bland platitudes. Brilliant as it is, I'm not sure I'll play the sequel: I don't think my self esteem will be able to take it. ■

83



198X

At the risk of sounding like an NPC from *The Witcher*, I grew up in a village that had as many buildings with thatched roofs as tiled ones. So the sight of glittering skyscrapers framed against the night sky always fills me with wonder. That's why part of me would have loved *198X* if it was just synth music and slow pans across pixelated cityscapes. But it's more than that: a short, affecting look back at arcades that nails their capacity to spark a lifelong obsession with games. And, more unusually, it actually gets the difficulty level right. Instead of breezing through each level, you genuinely get the sense you're hunched over a coin-hungry cabinet in a sticky-floored videogame sanctuary. ■

81



KINGSWAY

The mantis shrimp has the fastest predatory strike in the ocean, lashing out in less than 800 microseconds. But compared to the speed I move when closing an unwanted popup ad, the mantis shrimp is like a narcoleptic grandmother after a Sunday roast. That's why I love *Kingsway*, an RPG set entirely within the operating system of a pretend PC. For the first time in my life I feel like I've trained for something. From the crackling hard drive sound effects to the blocky blue progression bars, everything feels like it was created from a snapshot of my earliest PC gaming experiences. The only thing that could heighten the feeling was if it came packaged with a Packard Bell air freshener. ■

77



THE HEX

Best to save *The Hex* for the smallest review in this spread, just so I can talk about how great it is without having the word count to spoil anything. It fits with this month's theme of being backwards glancing without being slavishly retro, with six different sections that lampoon classic game genres. But it's so self-aware that it's practically sitting in the room with you, watching you play. Which is actually a chilling thought. Maybe it's still here? Have five more points, just in case. ■

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INCLUDES EXCLUSIVE IN-GAME CONTENT CODES FOR NEW AND EXISTING PC PLAYERS



WORLD OF TANKS



9 TO COLLECT!

HEAVY METAL ICONS

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YouTube   

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BY CONTACTING **01843 233 525** / **SALES@HORNBY.COM**

CORGI
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HARDWARE

GET THE GAMES DESERVE



96

GROUP TEST

Game in comfort and style with the right chair. Your back will thank you.



102

BUYER'S GUIDE

Put together your perfect PC by following our three expert builds.

100

TECH REPORT

How your PC can help uncover galactic mysteries.



GROUP TEST

GAMING CHAIRS

How to pick a styling seat.

By Jorge Jimenez

The best gaming chair can round off your PC gaming setup (and prevent you from rounding off your spine). That's something we can all appreciate. We're not just talking about the most luxurious gaming chairs in this group test, either. There's everything from gaming thrones to humble office chairs in the running to be the best for your back.





HEY YOU, SIT UP STRAIGHT!

One thing a great gaming chair can't do is teach healthy posture. And don't think just because you've bought the best it means you can get away with slouching. You can't. That's why we've spoken with ergonomist Melissa Afterman to find out the best ways to maintain a healthy seating position while PC gaming.

Here's how you should do it:

- 1. Your knees should be bent at 90 degrees, and your feet flat on the floor.
- 2. Your elbows should be level with your desk and close to your body (meaning that you shouldn't have to extend your arms to reach your mouse and keyboard).
- 3. Your shoulders should be relaxed.
- 4. Your lower back should be supported. If your chair doesn't have built-in lumbar support, a small pillow can do the job.
- 5. Your monitor should be positioned such that you don't have to tilt your head up.

Titan Softweave

SECRETLAB £379

Simply the best

1 Secretlab's Omega has been our top pick for the longest time, basically since we first reviewed it back in 2018. But now, ever since the Softweave version of the Secretlab Titan has slid beneath our butts, we don't ever want to stand up again. Some of that success comes down to its lumbar support, which rivals those you'd find on far more expensive chairs. But the Softweave version of the Titan also offers extra temperature regulation, and a downright luxury feel, to make it worth the extra expense. The Titan is also very similar in design to the Secretlab Omega but has been created for the larger frame. Part of that means you don't get the somewhat restrictive racing seat that clamps around your thighs, offering a much more comfortable experience whether or not you're a larger human. It even allows you to sit cross-legged. We cannot vouch for the ergonomics of sitting cross-legged, but we can vouch for the superb comfort and quality of the Secretlab Titan Softweave.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Comfortable temperature regulation
- Built-in adjustable lumbar
- Up to five-year warranty

SPECS SEAT TYPE: RACING BACK, LEVELLED SEAT BASE / RECLINE: 165 DEGREES / WEIGHT CAPACITY: 290 LBS / WEIGHT: 77 LBS / AVAILABLE COLOURS: BLACK, COOKIES AND CREAM, CHARCOAL BLUE

Embody

LOGITECH G X HERMAN MILLER £1,195

Effective ergonomics

2 Perhaps you've heard of the Herman Miller Embody. It has long been a champion of office life for fancy workplaces, winning favour among corporations for its long-lasting comfort and quality. It's those same qualities that make it a great among gamers, too, and Herman Miller has since teamed up with Logitech G to make something tailor-made for our gaming rumps. Admittedly, the Logitech G x Herman Miller Embody doesn't differ much from its commercial cousin. That's hardly a mark against it, however. The Embody's back support and absurdly high quality make a welcome return but it now comes with a few more flourishes to win over gamers. Namely, extra cooling material that helps support a more active gaming position. The tried and tested Embody design is simply one of the best chairs for office work or gaming. It's incredibly comfortable over prolonged use, supports an active and healthy posture, and is easily fitted to your frame. The warranty is a standout feature at 12 years, too.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Stimulates blood and oxygen flow
- Unrivaled back support
- 12-year/24hr use warranty

SPECS SEAT TYPE: TASK CHAIR / MATERIAL: MULTI-LAYER FABRIC / SEAT HEIGHT: 17-22 INCH / WEIGHT CAPACITY: 300 LBS / WEIGHT: 51 LBS



GROUP TEST

Hero

NOBLECHAIRS **£365**

Typical style, atypical back support

3 The Noblechairs Hero takes back support seriously. While not the most exciting of chairs, or the sportiest, it certainly does a good job of taking care of your back with an adjustable lumbar support built into the rear of the backrest. Through a mechanically satisfying clicky dial on its side, it's possible to tweak the level of lumbar support to your liking.

The Hero also benefits from a wide seat surface, long-lasting materials and a firm yet comfortable construction. Speaking of which, the Hero is easy enough to assemble, although you may want a little

help attaching the backrest to the seat. You really don't want to pull your back out while setting up your ergonomic gaming chair.

Aside from that, it has a decent recline and fully adjustable wrist-rests. It's heavy but glides pretty easily on the supplied casters. It'll look just fine in both an office or gaming setup, so you're getting a chair that can do both. Not bad, if you can afford it. However, the armrests could be a bit more comfy.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Great for lumbar support
- Ideal for larger frames
- Has a firm seat and back-rest

SPECS SEAT TYPE: RACING SEAT / **RECLINE**: 90-135 DEGREES / **WEIGHT CAPACITY**: 330 LBS / **WEIGHT**: 61.7 LBS / **AVAILABLE COLOURS**: BLACK, BLACK AND RED / BLUE / PLATINUM / GOLD

IT'S POSSIBLE TO TWEAK THE LEVEL OF LUMBAR SUPPORT TO YOUR LIKING



NeueChair

NEUECHAIR **£459**

Plain office chair or gaming hero?

4 If you're the sort of person who prioritises functionality over flash, the NeueChair is an excellent option. This isn't to say it's not stylish – quite the opposite. The NeueChair comes in a sleek, muted obsidian or flashy chrome/silver. Both with bold, sweet curved supports on the back and an attractive black mesh. More importantly, the NeueChair is built to last, with a heavy, sturdy industrial construction. Even the chair's weight in the packaging indicates a solid piece of carefully constructed industrial art: it's heavy and substantial.

Assembling is a breeze. It comes in two discrete pieces and is simply a matter of inserting the casters and pushing them together. Almost every aspect of the seat is adjustable, from the armrests to the adjustable lumbar support system that lets you change the height depth of the backrest. It's one of the best office chairs we've ever had the pleasure to sit in, and if you can afford the admittedly steep price tag, well worth the investment.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Ridiculously sturdy and well made
- Comfortable and supportive
- Highly adjustable

SPECS SEAT TYPE: TASK CHAIR / **RECLINE**: 85-130 DEGREES / **WEIGHT CAPACITY**: 240 LBS / **WEIGHT**: 64 LBS / **AVAILABLE COLOURS**: SILVER, OBSIDIAN



Kaiser 2

ANDASEAT £330

Big and tall bliss

5 If you're a big and tall gamer, you might have noticed that there aren't many gaming chairs catered to your build. Whether it's a lower weight capacity or too short, or even feels like it'll break as soon as you sit in it, it might feel like you're doomed to lacklustre sitting arrangements.

Well, sorry, we won't stand for that. There are in fact many gaming chairs that will support bigger builds, including the Kaiser 2 featured here.

The AndaSeat Kaiser 2 screams large and in charge, supporting gamers up to 397lbs and 7ft tall. The Kaiser 2 is built on

a solid steel frame with oversized bars to provide support.

Covered in premium PVC leather and extra thick memory foam cushioning, the Kaiser 2 manages to look more like a gaming chair for grownups. Available in black and a lovely maroon, no more will have to stuff yourself into a tiny gaming chair and hope for the best. The Kaiser 2 manages to offer the function, comfort, and style that you want in your premium gaming chair.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Sturdy
- Perfect for big and tall gamers
- Extra large lumbar support

SPECS SEAT TYPE: RACING SEAT / MATERIAL: PVC LEATHER / SEAT HEIGHT: 19-22 INCH / WEIGHT CAPACITY: 397 LBS / WEIGHT: 73 LBS



T3 Rush

CORSAIR £250

Simple and straightforward

6 Corsair's lineup of premium gaming chairs has gotten a much-needed visual improvement with the T3 Rush. The T3 Rush is an insanely comfy chair thanks to its memory foam lumbar pillow but, more importantly, uses a breathable soft fabric in place of the usual faux leather.

The benefit of this breathable fabric is that it retains less heat, keeping you fresh and comfy instead of sweating on squeaky pleather. It also simply looks great, and is a welcome departure from the usual faux leather chairs we see all too often. The Rush also reclines to a ridiculous 180

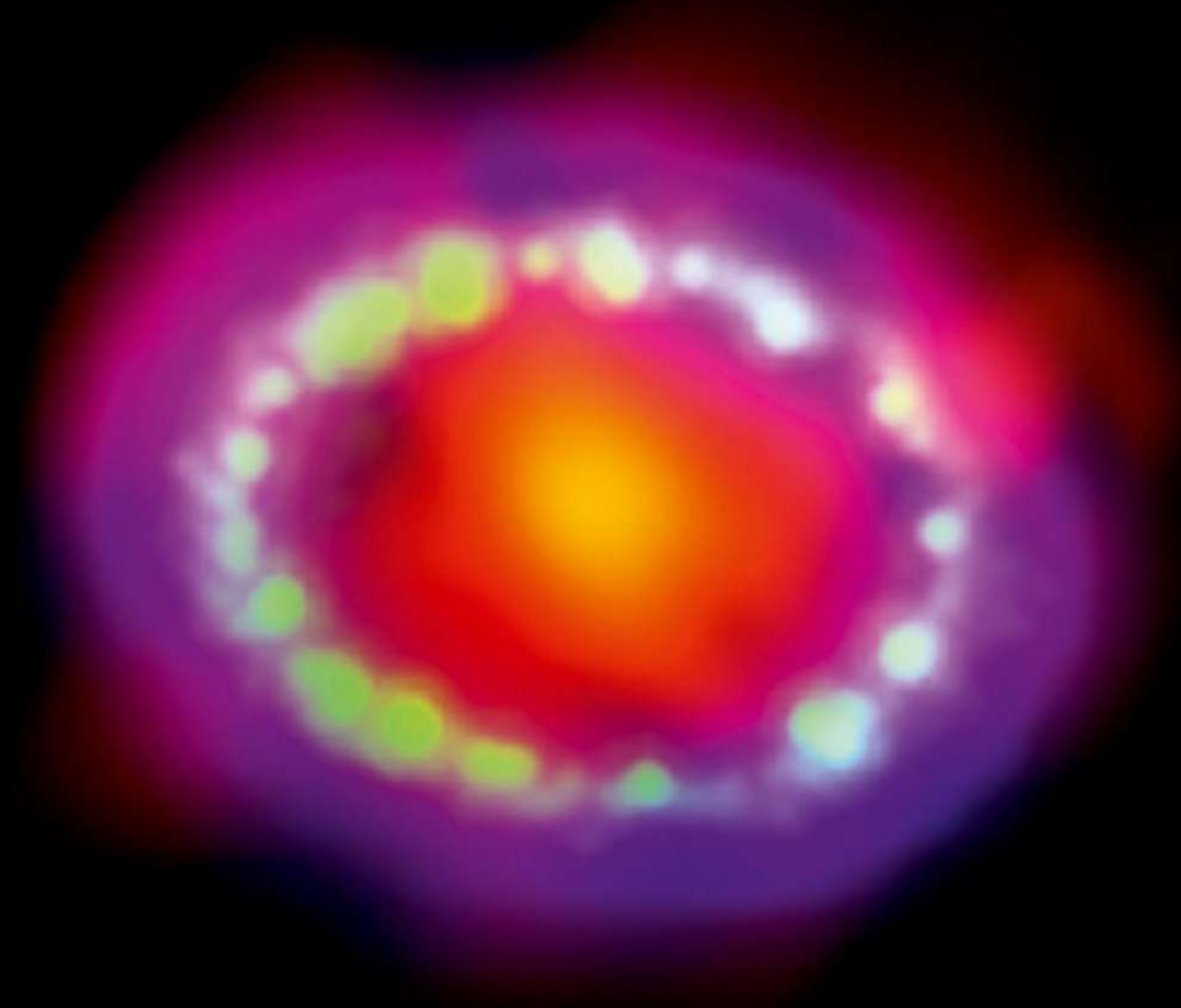
degrees in case you wanted to lie back and take a comfy cat nap before you take on another marathon streaming session of *Apex Legends* or *CS: GO*.

The only major downside for the T3 Rush mostly fits for smaller framed users. If you require a little larger seat, the T3 will be an uncomfortably tight fit. Other than that, the T3 Rush is an impressive-looking gaming chair that doesn't need a loud colour to make a statement.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Breathable soft fabric
- 4D armrests
- Memory foam lumbar pillow

SPECS SEAT TYPE: RACING SEAT / RECLINE: 180 DEGREES / WEIGHT CAPACITY: 265 LBS / WEIGHT: 49.6 LBS / AVAILABLE COLOURS: CHARCOAL, GRAY/CHARCOAL, GRAY/WHITE



Supernova 1987a, the most recently observed supernova, took place in the Large Magellanic Cloud.

MASS EFFECTS

How **VOLUNTEER COMPUTING** is narrowing down the search for neutron stars

Folding@Home, the distributed computing project that's taking on COVID, cancer, and all kinds of other diseases through the power of unused graphic cards and idle CPU cores, has been in the headlines a lot recently, not only for creating the world's first exascale supercomputer, but for its recent paper in *Nature* in which it set out potential targets for new drugs within the spike protein of SARS-Cov-2, which the virus uses to burrow into our cells and cause COVID-19.

But what if your thinking transcends Earthly disease and wants to roam wider? What if you want to join Tim Curry's Anatoly Cherdenko in spaaaaace? Well, with the demise of SETI@Home, you're no longer able to hunt for signals from alien civilisations, but you can probe the mysteries of gravitational waves and neutron stars with Einstein@Home. (There are many other projects, including a neat one, Leela Chess Zero, that's teaching computers to play chess.)

Einstein@Home takes data from various sources, including the Arecibo radio telescope we've covered in these pages before its untimely collapse. It then processes this data looking for pulsars, the rapidly spinning neutron stars discovered in 1967 by Jocelyn Bell (her male PhD supervisor was awarded the Nobel prize for her work in 1974, because cough, cough, cough) using the Arecibo telescope.

The idea for Einstein@Home came from a conversation in 1999 between physicist Bruce Allen, currently director of the Max Planck Institute for Gravitational Physics in Hannover Germany (while we're talking about PhD supervisors, Allen's was Stephen Hawking), and a friend. SETI@Home had been mentioned in the *LA Times*, but because studying gravity wasn't considered as 'cool' as searching for aliens, the idea was dropped. The idea resurfaced in 2004, when Allen was put in touch with David Anderson from UC Berkeley, the man behind the BOINC software used by many distributed computing efforts. Einstein launched in 2005, and the rest is history. Or, given the wibbly-wobbly nature of time at the quantum level, possibly not.

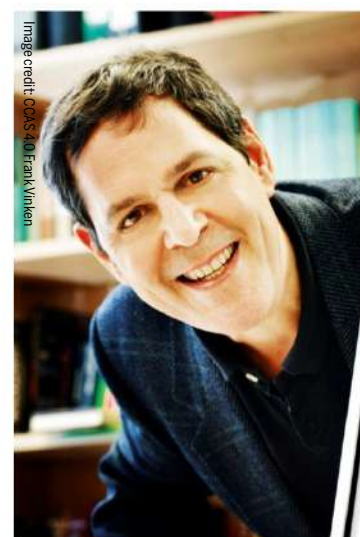
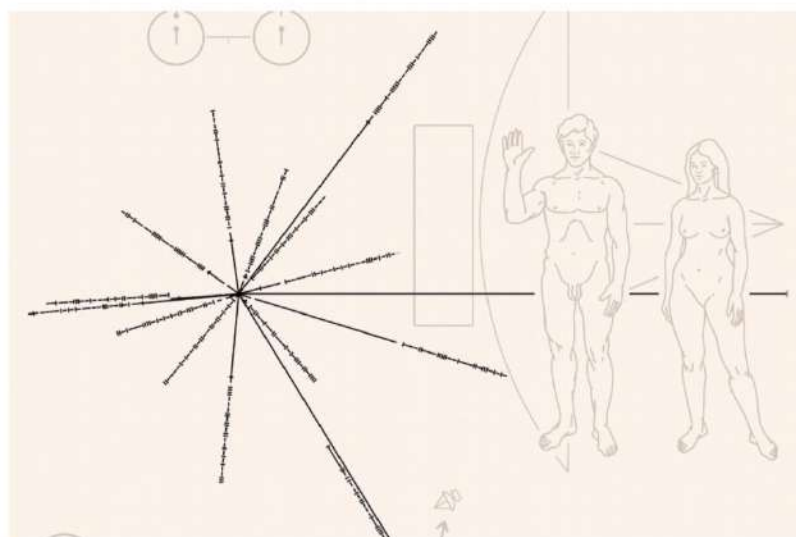
Studying pulsars and gravitational waves in this way requires plenty of computation time, however, and running the racks of equipment needed to create a modern supercomputer takes, according to Allen's estimate, over 2.6 million euros a year just in electricity costs. Far better, then, to farm the work out to volunteers, using the spare capacity of computers that were running anyway.

A pulsar is a spinning neutron star. It acts something like a lighthouse, producing a beam of radiation from its magnetic poles (some emit visible light, others radio waves, X-rays, gamma rays...) that washes across the Earth. This looks to us like a light flashing on and off quickly and regularly (the Crab Pulsar spins once every 33ms). This speed and regularity



Neutron star?

Neutron stars are stars that have undergone gravitational collapse to the extent that the electrons, which usually orbit at a small distance from the protons and neutrons in the atomic nucleus, are forced to merge with the protons, creating nothing but neutrons. A neutron star 20km in diameter could weigh as much as one and a half times the mass of our Sun (diameter: 1.4 million km).



FAR LEFT: The plaque aboard the Pioneer spacecraft shows the position of Earth triangulated from the positions of 14 pulsars.

MIDDLE: The chart on which Jocelyn Bell recorded her first data from pulsar PSR B1919+21 in 1967. It was initially called LGM, for 'Little Green Men', such was the regularity of its signal.

FEEL THE PULSE *Pulsars light up the night sky*



THE CRAB PULSAR

The Crab Pulsar is the remains of a supernova widely observed on Earth in the year 1054.



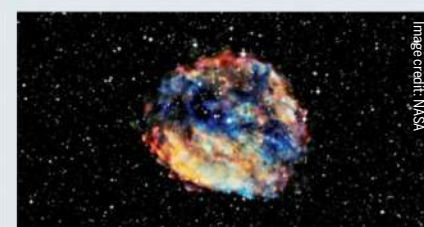
PSR B1509-58

An image from NASA's Chandra X-ray Observatory of PSR B1509-58, a spinning neutron star.



SXP 1062

This pulsar is in another galaxy – SXP 1062 is in the Small Magellanic Cloud, a satellite galaxy of the Milky Way.



RCW 103

A supernova remnant 9,000 lightyears from Earth, this cloud contains one of the slowest pulsars ever discovered.

offers a way to study gravitational waves, the new hotness in physics that act like ripples in spacetime, expanding and contracting the distance between objects as they pass by and therefore interfering with the regularity of the pulses.

Pulsars don't actually generate gravitational waves themselves though, at least not that we can yet detect. Previous gravitational wave discoveries have come from one-off events, such as the merger of two enormous black holes that caused spacetime itself to ring like a bell. The discovery of continuous gravitational waves from a spinning object would be big news, as Allen explains, "The first detection was announced in February 2016, and since that time about 100 other signals have been detected. And they're similar in nature, they're either two black holes merging together, or two neutron stars merging together, they last a very short time and then they're gone."

"What we're looking for now, is what would happen if you had a spinning neutron star with a little mountain on it, a little bump. As that rotates, that little bump makes it wobble a little bit. And that wobbling radiates gravitational waves. And that would give us a picture of what's going on inside the star, so this would be a way of studying the properties of a star that we can't see otherwise."

And when Allen says a 'little bump', he's not kidding. "A neutron star is about ten kilometres in radius. We know, based on the searches that we've done, that they are round to about one part in ten to the eighth power, which means the mountains aren't bigger than a tenth of a millimetre." That's an interesting definition of a mountain, but the data to support it comes from Einstein@Home – from the PCs of people like those who read

this mag. If the bumps on a neutron star were any bigger, the thinking goes, they'd have been detected by now.

STAR TURN

That kind of mind-blowing fact is part of the reason it's important to study gravitational waves. Folding@Home has the USP of helping cure disease. SETI@Home was about finding aliens, who wasn't going to sign up to that? Einstein@Home is a trickier sell. "We all walk around with a picture of the world around us," says Allen. "The Earth isn't flat, the Moon isn't made of green cheese, things like that. Your notion of what the universe is is part of how you understand the world, and what we're doing here is a very small step towards understanding the world a little bit better. It doesn't improve our lives from day to day, but I do think it's actually an important part of human culture. When we discover, hopefully, continuous gravitational waves one day,

it's gonna be a footnote in history, but people will go on to use those to study and learn more about neutron stars, and from there learn about other very dense matter. It's little steps. We think in our galaxy there are about 100 million pulsars, of which we've detected around 3,000 because they happened to be spinning at the right rate."

Einstein@Home has been publishing several papers a year (four in 2020) detailing its discoveries and there is so much more to be discovered. While Folding@Home is tackling an acute crisis down on Earth, it's good to know that others have their heads in the sky, making discoveries for no other reason than to expand the sphere of human knowledge. ■

Ian Evenden

STUDYING PULSARS IN THIS WAY REQUIRES PLENTY OF COMPUTATION TIME

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£600

MOTHERBOARD		A320M-A Pro MSI £42 Everything you need and nothing else. This MSI motherboard is simple but it works. And that's all we can ask for at this price.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 5 3400G AMD £130 Capable budget CPU and GPU in one tiny package, and it also comes with its very own CPU cooler.
GRAPHICS CARD		None This build is tailored to today's GPU shortage. But don't fret, once cards are back in stock you could slot one in to this PC for an upgrade.
COOLER		Wraith Spire AMD Free with CPU The Wraith Stealth is a great cooler made even better by the fact it comes free with our choice of chip. Budget heaven.
MEMORY		Vegeance LPX 8GB (2x 4GB) DDR4-3000 Corsair £39 For gaming we only really need 8GB of RAM, and this stuff is quick to boot.
POWER SUPPLY		MWE White 400W Cooler Master £39 Small by today's standards, this PSU from a trusty manufacturer offers plenty of juice for this build and a little more.
SSD		MX500 500GB Crucial £57 One of the best value SATA SSDs you can buy and plenty fast enough for a snappy OS.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 You don't necessarily need a HDD in 2020, but if you're a virtual hoarder, this'll give you loads of useful extra space.
CASE		Neos BitFenix £36 You'll want to minimise how often you rebuild your PC, so make sure to give it a good home. This case'll do nicely.
DISPLAY		GW2280 BenQ £105 A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.
KEYBOARD		G213 Logitech £40 It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish, and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.
MOUSE		G102 Logitech £35 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.
HEADSET		HS35 Corsair £40 This headset delivers in-game with its punchy drivers and clear microphone – perfect for video calls and multiplayer alike.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,438

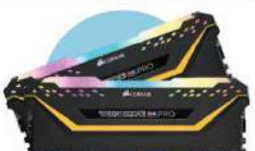
MOTHERBOARD		B450 Tomahawk Max MSI £120 A reliable platform for your build, the Tomahawk Max also comes in black to complement any style.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 5 3600X AMD £198 This CPU is one of the greats, and uses the Zen 2 architecture to dominate in gaming and productivity.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3060 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia £369 The RTX 3060 Ti is a little overkill but we're willing to make sacrifices elsewhere to make it work.
COOLER		Wraith Spire AMD Free with the CPU We love a freebie, especially one as capable as the cooler included with the 3600X. This'll keep your machine running smoothly.
MEMORY		Ballistix 16GB DDR4 (2x8GB) Crucial £75 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		CX650M Corsair £93 The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.
SSD		S70 1TB Addlink £70 Building on a budget doesn't mean sacrificing speed – the Addlink S70 proves you can indeed have both.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £70 An ATX case is all you need for this build. We like this one because it's simple, functional, and really nice to look at.
DISPLAY		AOC G2590FX AOC £173 Everything a PC gamer could want: Full HD, 144Hz refresh rate, 1ms response time, AMD FreeSync and Nvidia G-Sync compatible.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS HyperX £80 As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.
MOUSE		Model O- Glorious £59 Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.
HEADSET		Blackshark V2 Razer £94 The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds

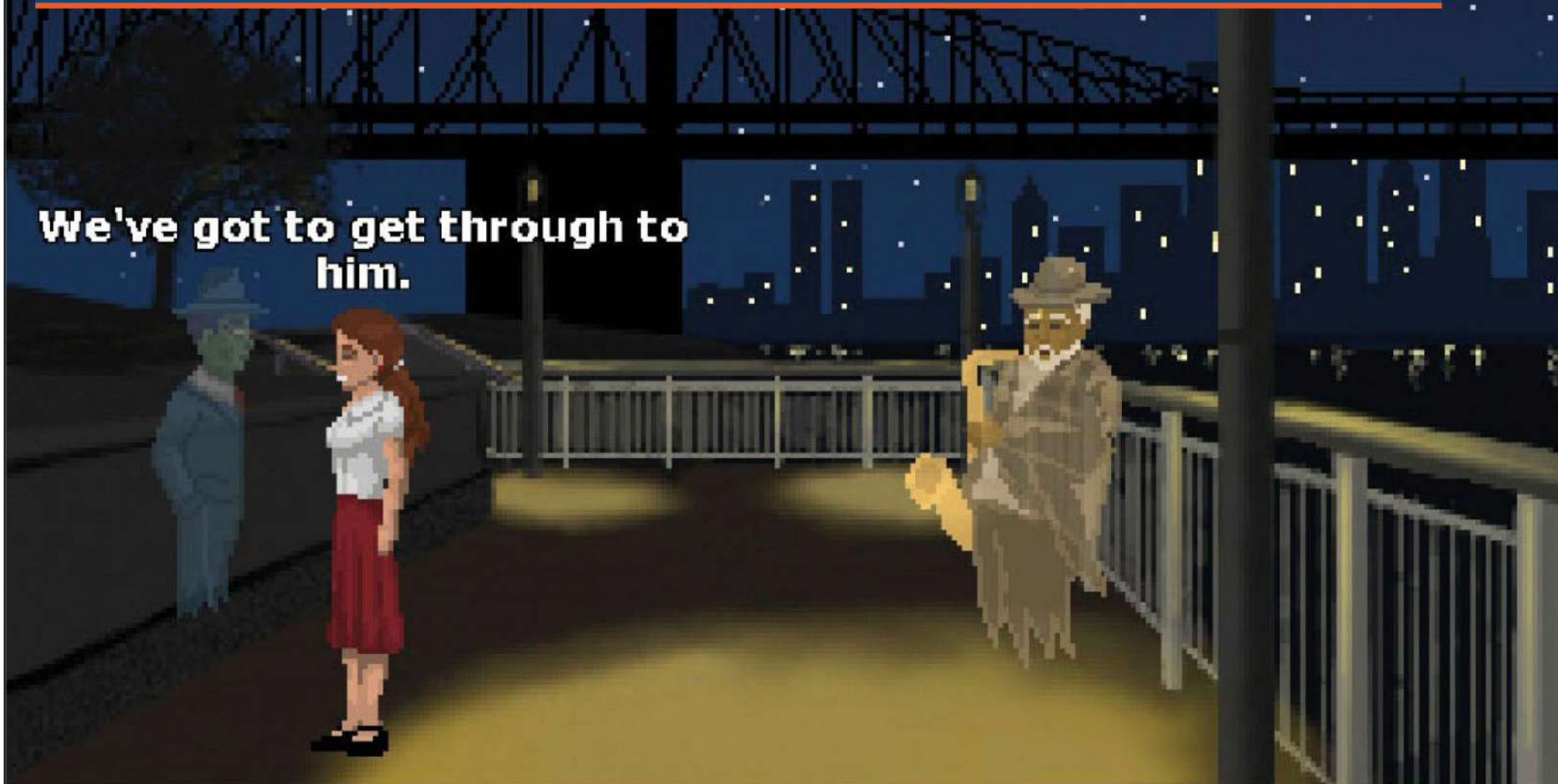


TOTAL
£4,216

MOTHERBOARD		MPG Z490 Gaming Carbon WiFi MSI £260 A heady mix of enthusiast motherboard functionality and build quality that stops short of god-tier motherboard pricing.
PROCESSOR		Core i9 10900K Intel £529 If you want the fastest gaming CPU, look no further than Intel's flagship Core i9.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3080 Ti Founders Ed Nvidia £1,199 The RTX 3080 Ti is the latest flagship graphics card from Nvidia, but savvy builders may prefer the RTX 3080.
COOLER		Kraken X63 NZXT £123 One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump and, of course, RGB lighting for more pizzazz.
MEMORY		Vengeance RGB Pro 32GB DDR4 (2x16GB) @ 3,200 Corsair £176 If you truly want to show off, even your system memory should be aglow with RGB.
POWER SUPPLY		SuperNOVA 1000 G5 Gold EVGA £200 This calibre of gaming PC draws a lot of power. Thankfully, this PSU can handle it with high efficiency.
SSD		WD Black SN750 1TB Western Digital £169 Western Digital is back on Samsung's heels with this brilliantly fast, yet affordable, 1TB M.2 NVMe SSD.
HDD		860 QVO 2TB Samsung £195 Built on QLC flash memory, it's not the quickest storage around, but it's a speedy alternative to an HDD.
CASE		600C Corsair £135 If you're going big on parts, you should grab a case that has plenty of room for upgrades down the line. This one will do just fine.
DISPLAY		Nitro XV273K Acer £780 This one's an easy choice – 4K and 144Hz for under a grand is an offer we can't refuse, and neither should you.
KEYBOARD		G915 Lightspeed Logitech £210 Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.
MOUSE		G502 Lightspeed Logitech £110 With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.
HEADSET		Arctis 7 Wireless SteelSeries £130 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“No games capture the spirit of a city like Blackwell captures New York”

Everyone loves *Unavowed*, but the **BLACKWELL** quintology leading up to it deserves recognition

We all have our ‘end of a long day’ games that we relax in without the faculties of reflexes or a fully switched-on brain. For me lately, those games have been Dave Gilbert’s *Blackwell* series. They’re 2D point-and-click adventures in the old-school mould – they wait patiently as I click their scenes down to every last detail, they’re 100% voice acted, and their jazzy soundtracks envelop me like steam rising from a New York subway.

I came to the *Blackwell* series after playing Gilbert’s latest game, *Unavowed*, set in the same universe where the supernatural murmurs in the shadows of a beautifully observed New York City. And while *Unavowed* may well be the best point-and-click ever made, it’s fascinating to see

ROBERT ZAK



THIS MONTH
Guided depressed ghosts into the afterlife.

ALSO PLAYED
Chicken Police, Backbone

Gilbert and his studio Wadjet Eye Games climb towards that creative zenith through the *Blackwell* series.

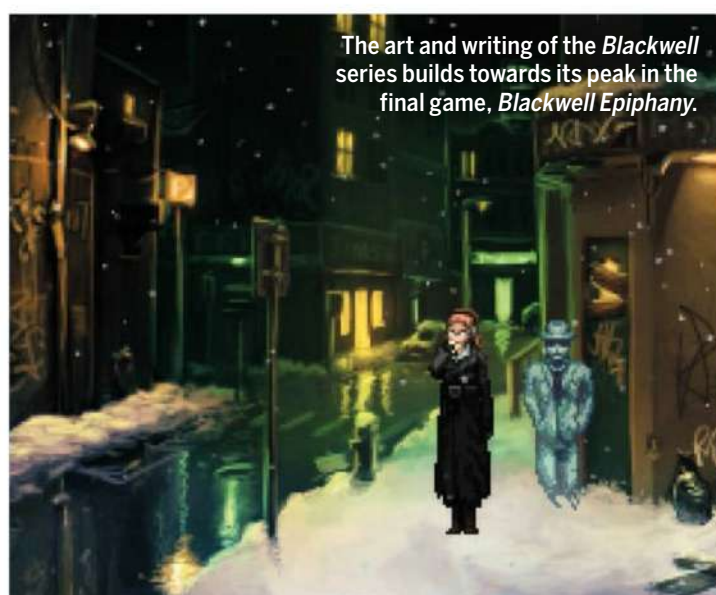
There are five games in total, following socially awkward spirit medium Rosangela Blackwell as she wanders a mostly nocturnal New York City in search of lost souls who need help passing on to the afterlife. She does this alongside her spirit guide Joey Mallone – a caustic-humoured ghost who looks and sounds like a PI from the 1950s, and who was also guide to Rosa’s late aunt Lauren.

TOP: The hand-drawn locations offer beautifully framed snippets of New York City.

Joey and Rosa’s dynamic is a peculiar one – his nasal lexicon, through which he calls Rosa ‘doll’ or ‘dollface’ contrasting with Rosa’s distinctly New York dryness and neuroticism. You may not warm to them right away, but their relationship offers moments of both comic relief and pensive reflection at just the right moments. It’s central to Rosa’s journey from rudderless young adult into seasoned medium.

Gilbert uses ghosts and the supernatural to maturely explore some serious themes. Suicide, depression, and mental illness all come up – young lives extinguished

GILBERT USES GHOSTS AND THE SUPERNATURAL TO EXPLORE SERIOUS THEMES



The art and writing of the *Blackwell* series builds towards its peak in the final game, *Blackwell Epiphany*.

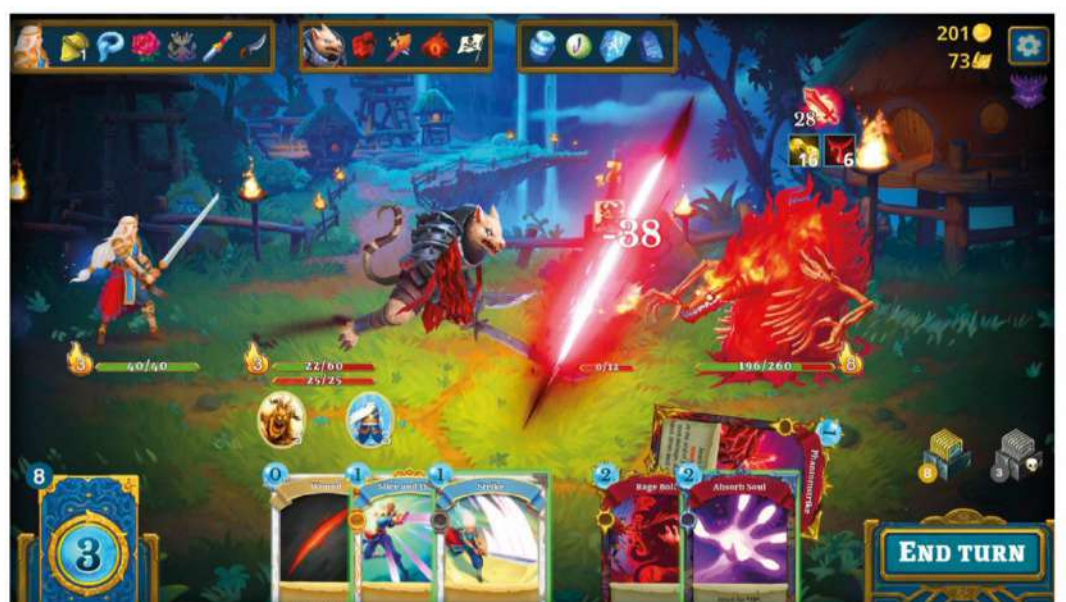
too soon, a businessman buried in debt, a musician who drowns his talent in alcohol. Their hauntingly lifelike stories and lonely limbo existence as ghosts invests you in helping them move onto the next realm – whatever that may be.

THE REAPER

Once it finds its feet, the series settles into a rhythm of journalistic-style investigations, as you listen to people carefully for key names and places, then type them into Rosa's computer to unlock new locations or dialogue options. Once you gather information, you return to the ghosts and try to jog their memory by getting them to accept the fact that they're dead.

No games capture the spirit of a real-world city like *Blackwell* captures New York. The diversity of the city's denizens is well represented, while the hand-drawn locations are instantly recognisable.

I really enjoy seeing the clear creative progress through the series too. You can feel both the writing and artwork maturing alongside its existentially wayfaring protagonist. By going through the *Blackwell* series game by game, you get to witness the creative journey of one of the best writers in videogames. ■



“Only gets more chaotic and complex”

Going big in ROGUEBOOK

▶ ROBIN VALENTINE



THIS MONTH
Made no effort to curb his roguelike deckbuilder addiction.

ALSO PLAYED
Wilderness, Griftlands

In deck-building games, less is more. That is, you're usually working towards a small deck, taking every opportunity to jettison cards and thinking carefully before adding anything new.

You're looking for predictability. You want the cards that make up your game-winning combo to come up, so you don't want your draw diluted with things that don't fit. In games like *Slay the Spire*, the ideal deck might be as small as five cards, creating one reliable sequence you can pull off every turn.

That sense of refining a deck down to its purest essence is a tactical thrill, but it's not very conceptually fun. Your instinct is to want to grab every cool new thing that comes your way, to feel like the possibilities are expanding before you. Being miserly about your deck is unintuitive, and can make the final stages of a run a rote affair – you've finished making something that works, and now just need to go through the motions of proving it.

It's fascinating how much rejecting the idea entirely makes

Roguebook stand out. At its core, it's a similar game to *Slay the Spire*, but the feel is very different.

Roguebook wants your deck to grow. As you add more cards, you gain powerful perks for your characters, many of which are further empowered by adding even more – and you get almost no opportunities to trim. Rather than refining down to a perfectly balanced machine, you're bolting new parts onto your unwieldy engine of battle, trying to find the larger synergies that make each addition a boon instead of a liability.

PAYING IT FORWARD

By the end of a run, a good deck will have multiple complementary strategies. And far from becoming more predictable as you go, combat only gets more complex. By the time you hit the final boss, you're thinking on your feet every turn.

Is it a better approach? Not necessarily – it has its own downsides, including leaving you much more at the mercy of probability. But as someone with hundreds of hours sunk into deck-builders, it's lovely how refreshing and exciting one clever twist on the formula can be. ■



All this takes place inside a magic book for some reason.

“Thousands of people helped me and they never even knew it”

FINAL FANTASY XIV versus maternity

After sharing loads of exciting new info for the upcoming *Endwalker* expansion and celebrating all things *Final Fantasy XIV* at the *FFXIV* Fan Festival back in May, the game’s music director Masayoshi Soken got up on stage and revealed he had been battling cancer over the last year. The revelation shocked fans and his colleagues as he kept the entire thing secret. He said he didn’t want to worry anyone, and revealed that working towards something for the sake of the fans helped him keep going. “Videogames can really heal,” he said, while everyone fought back tears on stage.

It was an incredibly poignant moment that resonated with many players, who soon started sharing their own stories of how *FFXIV* and its community helped them, be that by relating to the character’s struggles or through making friends in game. My story is a little more mundane. There was no fateful friendly meeting or special story beat that saved me – it was the simple sight of strangers

DANIELLA LUCAS



THIS MONTH
Shared moments with people without them ever knowing.

ALSO PLAYED
Planet Coaster, Ni No Kuni Remastered

silently going about their business that I found healing.

I had my daughter back in 2018 and while it was a joyous occasion with many people joking about how I wouldn’t have time for gaming anymore, I found myself incredibly isolated. The adjustment was hard, and I found myself glued to the sofa with a depression diagnosis. At first I didn’t think I could play *FFXIV* anymore – how can you commit to playing any dungeons when you might have to drop out at any second to feed your helpless little flesh potato? I was afraid to let anyone

down. “At least I can craft,” I told myself when I finally plucked up the courage to try returning. While I parked my character in Ul’Dah and slowly started working on my crafting logs, other players would run past me, interacting with marketboards or emoting at friends. It felt nice to be in a crowd – even if it wasn’t in real life there were still real people behind those characters.

GOLDEN TEARS

Eventually I tried doing some short trial and raid boss fights, and the more often I logged on, even if it was only for 15 minutes at a time, the less lonely I felt. Just knowing I could exist in a space alongside others, even though it wasn’t ‘real’, felt empowering. I could be a part of something for someone else’s journey. All of those brief moments, those snapshots into other people’s lives as they handed in quests and teleported into town, were enough to make me feel a little more human and a little more like myself again. Thousands of people helped me out of a dark place just by existing in *FFXIV*, and they never even knew it. That’s the healing power of games. ■

AN INCREDIBLY POIGNANT MOMENT THAT RESONATED WITH MANY PLAYERS



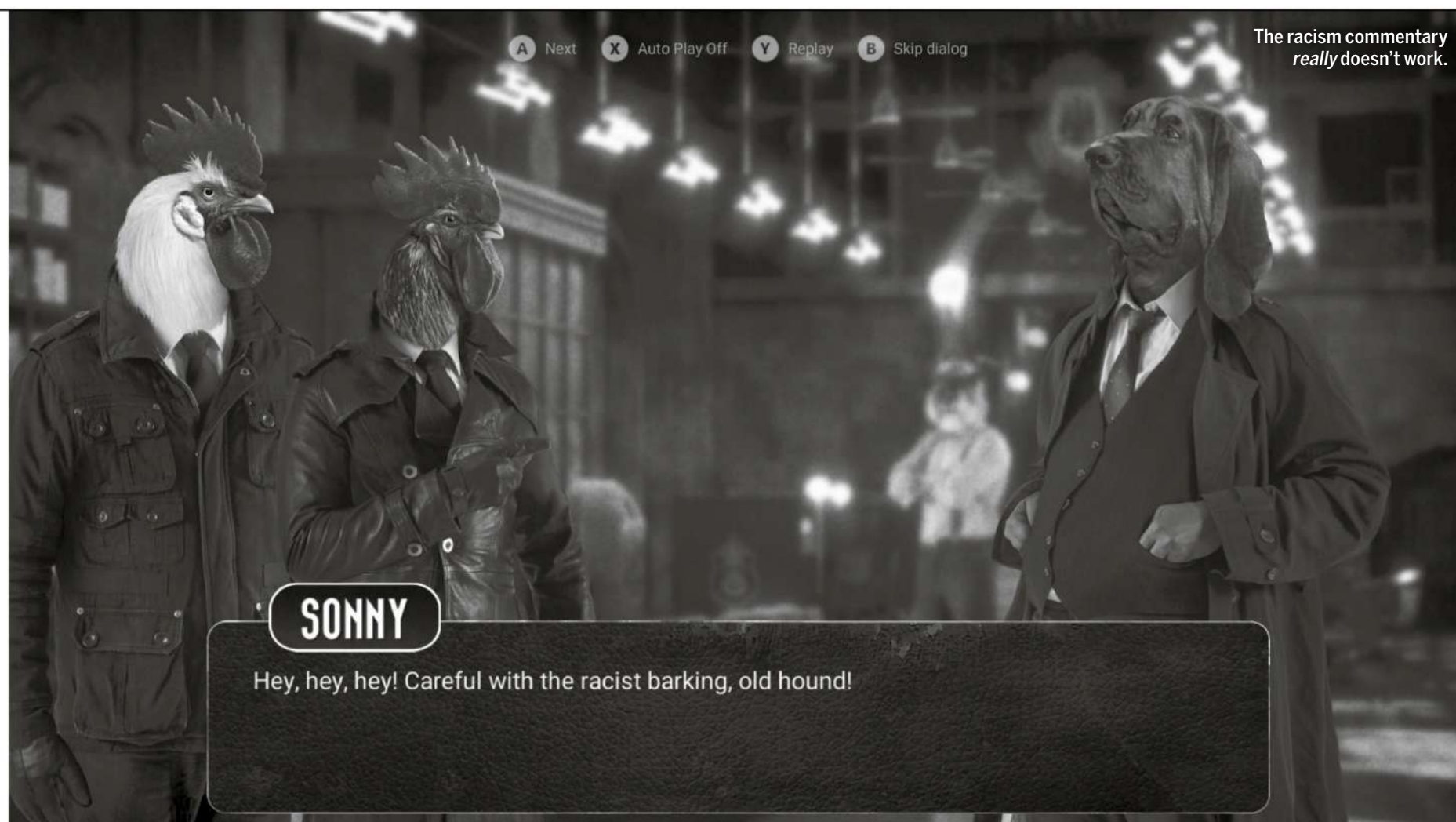
Who needs friends when you can AFK with strangers?



LEFT:
Why fight when you can be a chef?



BELOW: Live performing Bards are the buskers of *FFXIV*.



“The noir leanings are worn proudly on the game’s digital sleeve”

CHICKEN POLICE: PAINT IT RED! furs the lines between good and evil

With a title like that, and heroes named Sonny Featherland and Marty MacChicken, I was always going to buy this game eventually. Then along came another Epic Games Store sale with those £10 vouchers, and it was mine. Is it what I was expecting? Not really, because I wasn’t entirely sure *what* to expect, which is exactly why I bought it.

Chicken Police is a noir detective adventure where all the characters are animals. And *Chicken Police* has a sense of humour. Well, as long as you can get past the horrific implications of things like one of the main characters wearing a leather jacket.

Chicken Police – as you’ve probably noticed from the screenshots – essentially photoshops animal heads onto human bodies. I honestly can’t tell if the most hilarious and absurd moments that this generates are intentional or not. What I’m pretty confident of is that there’s an intent to attract the ‘furry’ market. *There’s a brothel*. I don’t have

LUKE KEMP



THIS MONTH
Met a royalist crocodile and a canine sex worker.

ALSO PLAYED
Mass Effect: Legendary Edition

a problem with this per se, but when I came across a Lemur in high heels and a figure-hugging dress staring at me unblinkingly, I had to go and have a little lie down.

FEATHER DREAM

Despite the absurdist trappings, the noir leanings are worn proudly on the game’s digital sleeve. There are a handful of sledgehammer-subtle Raymond Chandler references, and the primary voice actor seems to have been told to do his best Humphrey

I CAME ACROSS A LEMUR IN HIGH HEELS AND A FIGURE-HUGGING DRESS

Bogart impression. Everything is even presented in black and white for the most part, colour used only occasionally for dramatic effect. It also, I imagine, helps paper over the photoshopping cracks.

The writing and acting are both pretty good, and I’m pleasantly surprised to find that there’s actually a bit of proper detective stuff. It doesn’t seem possible to fail the bits where you draw major conclusions, but I love the fact that I can mess up suspect interviews – failing to get all possible info out of them – and choose to carry on with what I’ve got rather than retry. I can also confidently state that no other game I’ve ever played has so effectively communicated sexual tension between a chicken and a cat.

There are optional parts of the story, and so far, I’ve devoured them all. Partly, it’s because I’ve learned that these scenes can dig up info relevant to the case. Mostly, though, I suppose it’s because playing *Chicken Police* is one of the most surreal experiences of my life – and I don’t want to miss any of it. ■



DYING LIGHT: HELLRAID – THE PRISONER

A half-decent update shackled to a shambolic DLC. *By Robert Zak*

When a trailer announcing a major update for your DLC puts forward a stamina potion as a noteworthy ‘new feature’, then you’re probably a little thin on ideas. A fire potion? Sure. A frost potion? Cool! But a stamina potion? A tincture so bland that you always forget about it until it clogs up your inventory? Come on now, Techland. You’re better than this...

The stamina potion isn’t the highlight of this update to *Dying Light*’s dungeon-crawling *Hellraid* DLC – that would be the new story mode – but it is kind of apt. It speaks to the lack of imagination running through a DLC that fails to capture the appeal of its base game or of the dungeon-crawler style it tries to emulate.

The new story mode takes place in the same dungeons as the base DLC, but sees you following the guiding voice of a wizard – the titular prisoner – who’s been shackled deep in the dungeon and requests your help. As you go about opening portcullises and popping skeleton heads from their bodies, you’ll find a

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
June 8, 2021

DEVELOPER
Techland

PUBLISHER
Techland Publishing

LINK
bit.ly/3vHsDF2

couple of new weapons – a Corrupted Bow and a Bonecruncher Warhammer – that you can take back to the main game with you.

Oh, and there’s a new skeleton enemy with a shield – a complete pain in the ass to fight, and a prime exhibit showing that *Dying Light* was never designed as a one-on-one sword-and-shield fighting game.

The update itself isn’t terrible – it just feels like it should have been part of this DLC when it first came out, rather than ten months later. The update spruces *Hellraid* up slightly by improving the lighting, but its corridors and chambers, and its propensity towards neon lighting, give it the rudimentary feel of a mapmaker level from *TimeSplitters 2*. Its design has nothing on the base game’s city of Harran.

It also fails to address *Hellraid*’s clumsy overlaps with the main game. You’ll get alerts to use a ‘medkit’

when in *Hellraid* they’re actually healing potions, you’ll get warnings about attracting ‘Virals’ when they don’t exist in this mode, while the base-game UI with its bleeps and bloop sounds does little to bolster the already tenuous fantasy theme.

HELL NO

The frustrating thing about *Hellraid* is that it negates the base game’s greatest strengths: that gritty rush of parkouring through back alleys then up onto the rooftops to escape your undead pursuers. Many of the best combat mechanics – the sliding leg breakers, the bounding over zombie heads, the look-back grenade throw while sprinting – work in the context

IT NEGATES THE BASE GAME’S GREATEST STRENGTHS

of making enough space for yourself to get away from the hordes. Here in these dungeons there is no escape or way to build such momentum. You’re just smashing enemies to pieces until you’re puffed out, rebuilding your stamina, then running back in.

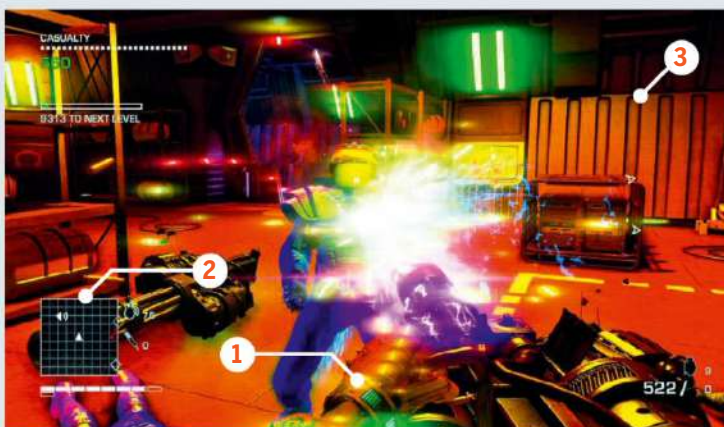
The best I can say for *Hellraid* is that it’s made me long for the open skies free-running freedom of Harran, compelling me to revisit the main game. Six years on from its original release, *Dying Light* feels archaic in its weapon management and inventories, but remains one of the most exhilarating zombie bashers around in large part thanks to how its parkour mechanics flow with the environment. *Hellraid* doesn’t have such strengths to lean on.

Credit has to be given to Techland for trying to salvage this most misguided of DLCs. With the studio presumably working full-throttle to finish *Dying Light 2* after one of the most troubled developments in recent memory, it’s good to see them still paying attention to a piece of content that could easily have been brushed under the carpet.

With this DLC, and some troubling stories coming out around the development of *Dying Light 2*, Techland hasn’t done its reputation many favours of late. This update doesn’t change that, but it at least builds a little goodwill as the studio builds towards its biggest moment. ■

BLOOD DRAGON KNOWS BEST

Learn from one of the best reskins of all time



1 ARMS RACE

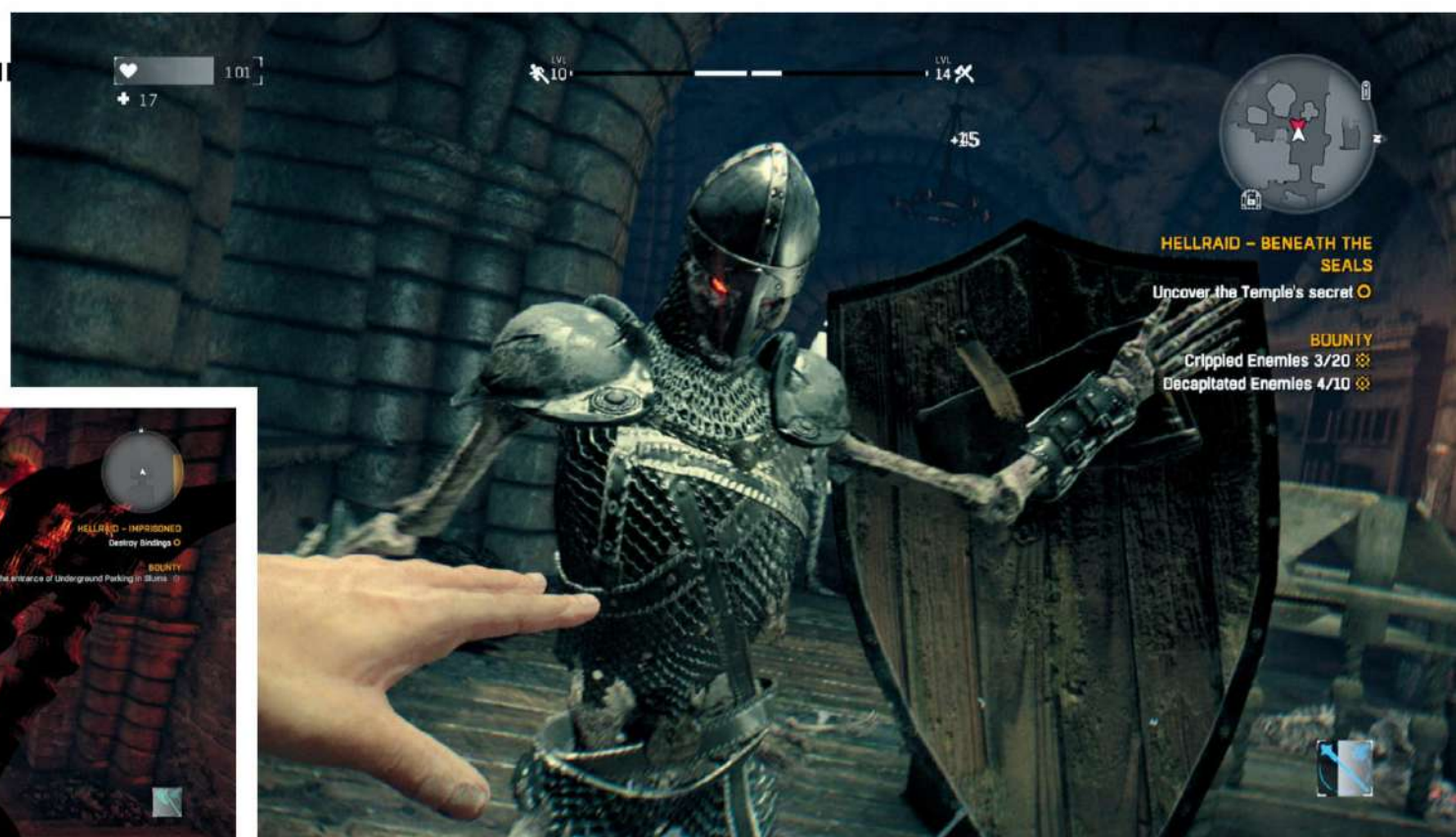
You can see from the hero’s arms that he belongs in the *Blood Dragon* universe. In *Hellraid*, the *Dying Light* hero just gets chucked into a fantasy world – with his watch and all – like a poor person’s Bruce Campbell.

2 UNUSUAL INTERFACE

Blood Dragon’s UI was designed to fit the neon faux-’80s theme, so even when we’re browsing its menus we’re still immersed. *Hellraid* just uses the base game UI, which jars with its fantasy theme.

3 FUN STORY

Blood Dragon was never going to be a fully fleshed story, so it plays into its silliness to great effect. *Hellraid*’s story mode takes itself too seriously, where it should have gone all in on Army of Darkness nonsense.



There's a basic progression in *Hellraid* that lets you unlock new weapons, but it's not much of an incentive.



ABOVE: These new shielded enemies will become your worst nightmare as you blow your stamina trying to break their guard.

LEFT: This perma-kneeling wizard is your guide in the new story mode.



The environments in *Hellraid* feel too enclosed to let you build that parkour momentum.



TOP: Ow, my toe.

ABOVE: The army is so predictable.

Tanks make the perfect toys.



KING KONG

Visiting Los Santos as a big ape. *By Christopher Livingston*



LEFT: This ape has a mean right hook.

BELOW: Time for a view from the top.



There aren't many characters from the world of cinema as tragic as King Kong. Brutally attacked on his home of Skull Island where he was doing nothing but peacefully existing and only occasionally eating one of the locals. Chased and shot at and eventually given a dose of knockout gas. Dragged to a boat and steamed across the ocean to a big, filthy, crowded city to be put on display and gawked at by anyone who could afford a nickel's admission. (Hey, it was the 1930s.) Freeing himself only to be shot at by the cops and the military, now with aeroplanes, and most painfully of all, completely rejected by his crush. Or maybe falling off a skyscraper onto his face was slightly more painful. Hard to say.

Point is, the oversized ape has had a rough time in his trips to the big city, and I think I'd like to create a happier ending for King Kong. Maybe if he could visit a city on his own terms and not because he was chained to a boat by some dickweed filmmaker, things wouldn't go so badly for him. Luckily, there's a King Kong mod for *Grand Theft Auto V*, created by the prolific and talented JulioNIB, who's been making mods for Rockstar's games for years. With the *JulioNIB's*

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
September 17, 2013

DEVELOPER
Rockstar

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
rockstargames.com/V

King Kong mod installed, and the other four mods it relies on installed, and a King Kong skin installed, and two more mods that make the installed King Kong skin work properly installed, I'm ready to go. (Please, Rockstar, add official support for mods and make this process all a lot easier for everyone.)



I CAN BARELY SEE THE PEOPLE, THEY MAY AS WELL BE ANTS

MONKEY MAGIC

I begin where Kong would probably begin, the Los Santos docks, where I figure Kong just got off a boat (willingly, instead of dragged off in chains). And as King Kong, I'm massive. I'm huge. I'm even bigger than I expected I'd be. The cars on the road look like toys. I can barely see the people, they may as well be ants. So I need to be careful if I'm going to nonchalantly make my way through the city for a sightseeing tour without making a mess. Remember, this is a vacation, and I'm determined not to wind up on top of a tall building swinging my oversized mitts at angrily buzzing aeroplanes.

I get four steps off the docks before my fifth step lands directly on a car. It instantly explodes under my big ape foot. I assume the driver and passengers are dead, though I'm at least a little comforted by the fact that most people in Los Santos are

MOD SQUAD

Other great destructive GTA V mods by JulioNIB



MAGNETO
Become the master of magnetism in a city filled with metal



SPIDERMAN
Fight crime. Or fight cops. You can fight anyone, really.



THANOS
Yep, you can really snap people out of existence



PREDATOR
Do some trophy hunting in Los Santos.

complete assholes so there's a good chance they deserved it.

As is often the case when a car explodes in *GTA V*, the cops are immediately alerted and my gentle, well-meaning Kong gets his very first wanted level. It's a piddly single star, which isn't usually enough to make me sweat, but as Kong I can't exactly avoid the police by hopping in a car and making a few clever turns down some back alleys. I'm a 100-foot-tall ape. They're gonna spot me.

So I jump on top of the nearby stadium and just sort of stand on the roof until the sirens die down and my wanted level vanishes. I guess the cops never drove close enough to see a ten-story primate lurking on top of a four-story building.

Walking through the streets just seems dangerous. If I keep stepping on cars and those cars keep exploding and killing all the passengers inside, I might wind up hurting my foot. You know how it feels to step on a Lego brick when you're not wearing shoes? It's painful. Also, you know, I'd be causing the deaths of a lot of people and getting the police all mad at me. I decide to head to the beach, where people aren't crammed into metal boxes and speeding around underfoot.

The beach doesn't really go much better than the highway did, plus on my way to the beach I clamber over a bridge and step on at least a half-dozen more vehicles and killed at least twice that many people. In fact, on the beach it's even more difficult to avoid killing people because they're not in cars. At least I can see the cars before I step on them. On the wide strip of sand the tiny people are really difficult to spot. I can hear them well enough – they're all screaming while I stomp around – but it's hard to pick them out among the tiny beach towels and colourful umbrellas. My wanted level

returns, and now I've got two stars. Full disclosure: the situation may have been exacerbated by the fact I've discovered this *King Kong* mod has a special attack that lets me pick up people and eat them.

OOK CLUB

So, yes, on the rare occasion I spot someone before I accidentally step on them, I have been picking up people and shoving them in my mouth. Look, an ape's gotta eat. All this crashing around and climbing bridges and smashing cars with my feet burns up a lot of calories, and I need to keep my strength up for the inevitable moment when I'm forced to climb a skyscraper and start swatting helicopters and planes from the sky. I know, I wanted to have a peaceful visit to Los Santos but that's clearly not going to happen. Not while I'm popping beachgoers into my mouth and chewing them up in an explosion of blood.

I manage to duck the cops again by cleverly standing behind the perfect cover, the Ferris wheel on the boardwalk. Well, at least it's the perfectly-sized cover. If it was a solid wheel instead of one you could see through, it'd be a great spot for an ape to lay low. I'm a little amused at the in-game notification telling me that I can't ride the Ferris wheel while I'm wanted by the police, as if the real reason wasn't that my butt is the size of a swimming pool and I definitely couldn't fit into a seat. I think the only reason the cops can't find me is that they don't drive down the boardwalk.

I make it to the hills north of the beach, finally some real room where I can run and jump around without things constantly exploding and killing people. Unfortunately though, the cops have a much easier time finding me because they've now begun sending helicopters my way.

It's sort of cute. The choppers buzz over and hover at eye-level with me, and then little ropes unspool and the tiny SWAT teams rappel down to the ground. Cute, but stupid. Are you sure you want to do that, fellas? Being near my feet hasn't worked out well for at least 40 or 50 people in the city so far. You'd be much safer shooting

PICKING UP PEOPLE AND SHOVING THEM IN MY MOUTH

me from the chopper where I can't step on you or pop you into my mouth for a mid-rampage snack.

GORILLA UNINTERRUPTED

Except no, you're actually not safer in the air because I'm goddamn King Kong and I have about eight different ways I can destroy helicopters. Probably the most fun is reaching out, grabbing the chopper from the air, and then hurling it as hard as I can, its little SWAT team ropes trailing through the air behind it. Sometimes the chopper hits something and blows up. Sometimes it just sails out of sight, which I find funnier. And sometimes I throw the chopper into another chopper and both of them explode. Along with grabbing, throwing and stomping, there are other attacks like uppercuts and targeting something in the distance, leaping toward it, and flattening it with a stomp. And of course, Kong can climb buildings.

Which I eventually do, giving into my fate. I'm King Kong. I'm in a big city. Things were always going to end with me clambering to the top of the tallest building I could find and getting shot at by helicopters and aeroplanes. I'm not a bad giant ape, I'm just misunderstood. By which I mean people don't understand why I enjoy crushing their cars and eating them. Once again, it looks like you can take the 100-foot-tall ape out of Skull Island, but you can't take Skull Island out of the 100-foot-tall ape.

You can find JulioNIB's *King Kong* mod at patreon.com/JulioNIB. There's a free version of the mod, though subscribing to his patreon gives your Kong more attacks to use. And I would highly suggest subscribing – his mods are excellent, and patrons get early access. ■



GOING APE

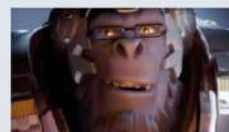
Other games where you can really go bananas



ANCESTORS: THE HUMANKIND ODYSSEY
Survive at the dawn of humanity.



APE OUT
Top-down action game with a killer soundtrack about a very angry ape.



OVERWATCH
Winston's loveable, intelligent, and a serious menace when he gets angry.



RAMPAGE WORLD TOUR
Climb buildings. Smash cars. Eat people.



One giant leap for ape-kind.



Kong invents the flying car.

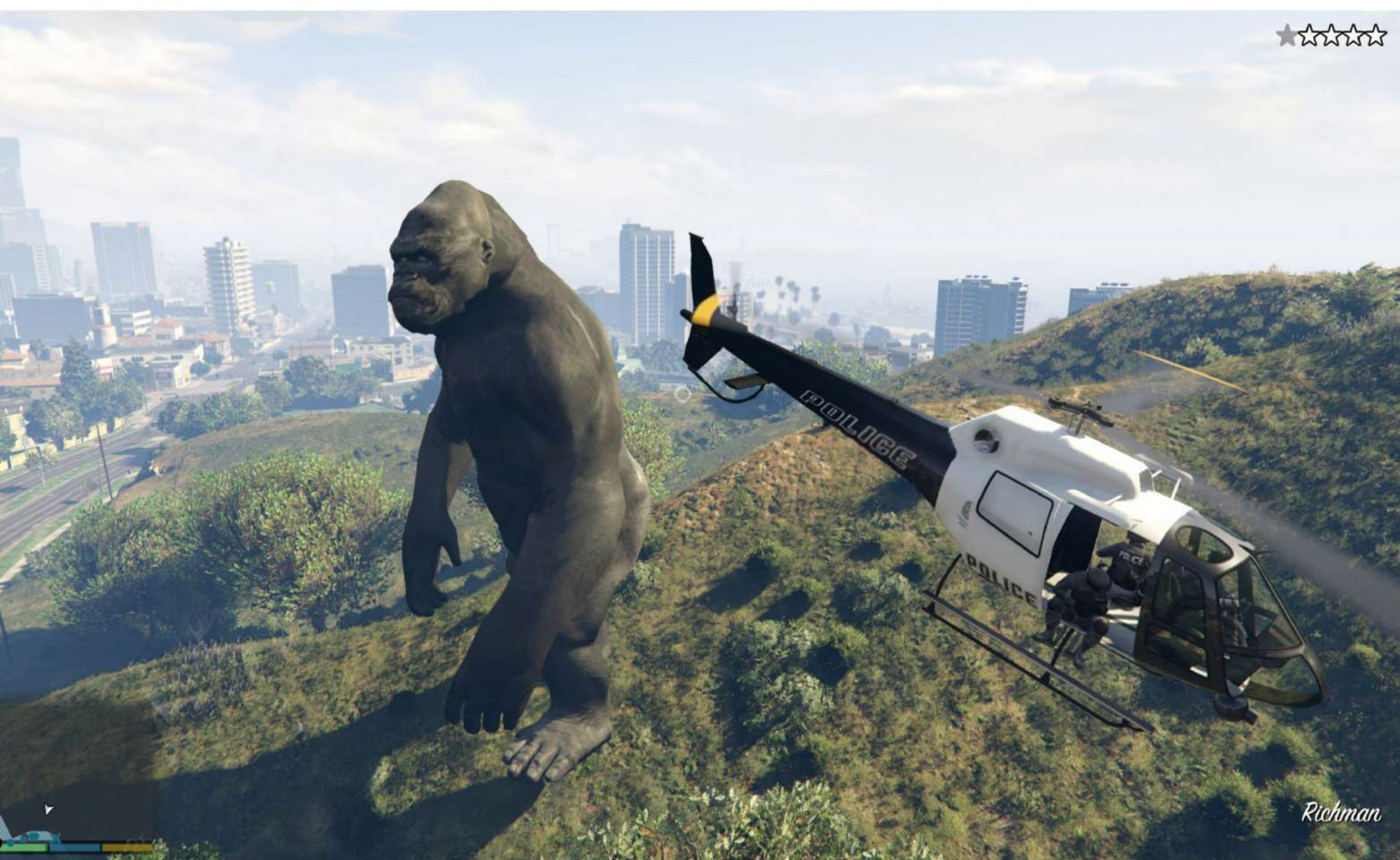


LEFT: Kong likes long walks on the beach.

LOWER LEFT: Yep, plenty of metal trees to climb.



BELOW: What's that buzzing noise?



★☆☆☆☆

Richman



HOW TO EXPERIENCE THE BEST OF THE BURNING CRUSADE CLASSIC

Relive your Outland adventures with our nostalgic tips. *By Sarah James*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Easy

TIME
Ongoing

VITAL LINKS

Levelling guide:
bit.ly/3pwUtCB

Gold making guide:
bit.ly/353Iz9E

Races guide:
bit.ly/3w1hVKu



DEMON SLAYER

1 You may have your mind firmly set on completing quests when you first arrive in Hellfire Peninsula, but the Fel Reaver has other ideas. It patrols around a big area stomping players with ease, so don't let it sneak up on you!



RACE AHEAD

2 Level a Draenei (Alliance) or a Blood Elf (Horde). Both are new races in *The Burning Crusade*, though you'll need to level them from 1 to 58 before you can hit Outland. Both have new starting zones and quests to explore as well.



BALANCING ACT

3 It's worth playing around with different specs as better balancing in TBC means every class has something to offer. Certain specs will always excel in specific areas but it can be fun to try a whole new class and playstyle.



PLAY PAL

4 Looking for a guild should be your top priority, especially if you want to raid or do dungeons regularly. Finding the right people to play with can make activities much more enjoyable in any MMO, and *WoW* is no exception.



TANKS A LOT

5 For Horde players, the introduction of paladins – previously Alliance only – means you'll see plenty of tanks about, which is great as they're usually in short supply. And it just so happens that dungeons are an excellent way to level-up.



LORE AND ORDER

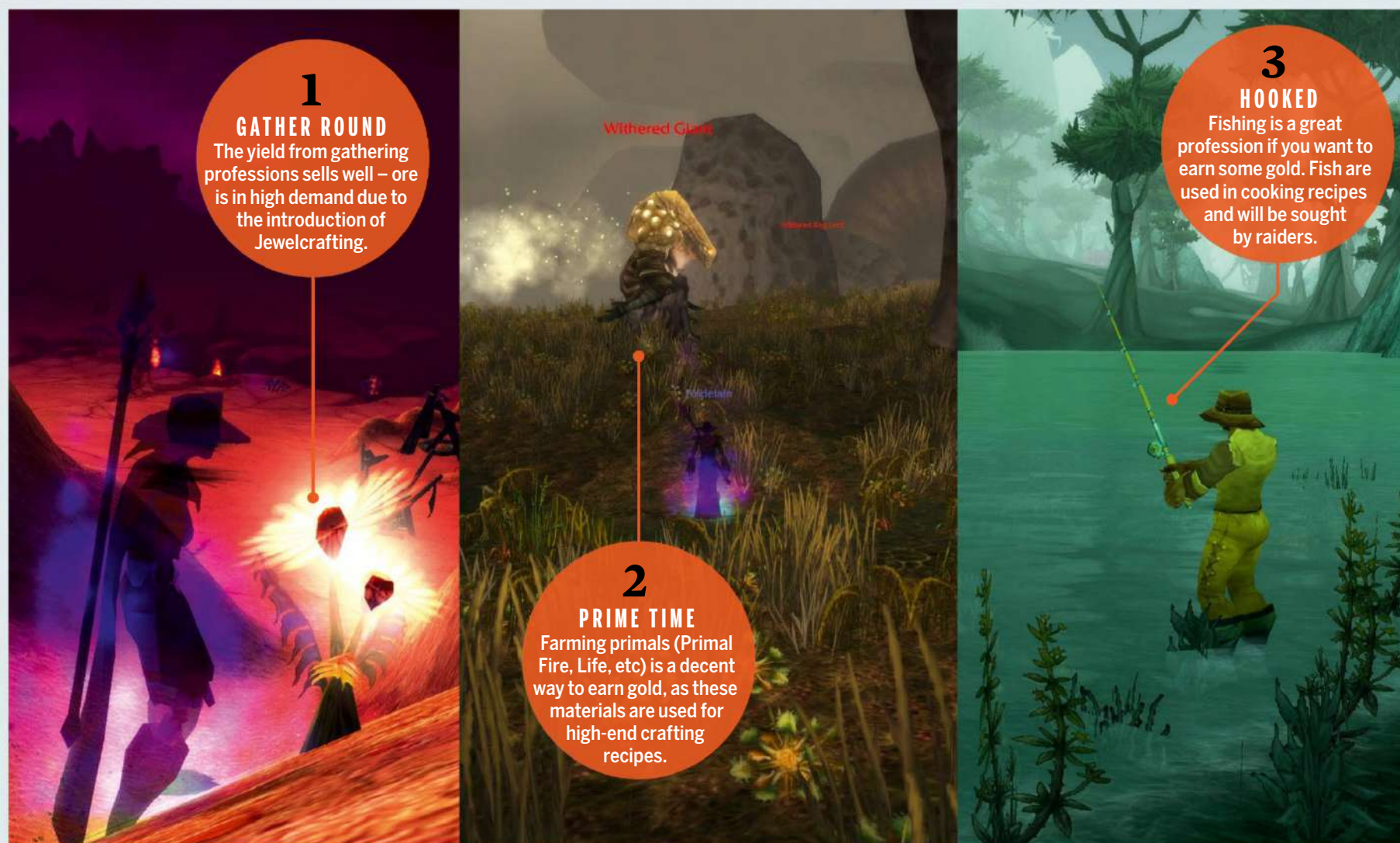
6 It's tempting to rush to level 70. But if you love the lore of *Warcraft*, it pays to take things a little slower. Stop and appreciate the contrasting zones of the orc homeland and the stories of the new races.



FLYING HIGH

7 You can experience flying for the first time at level 70 (68 for druids), giving you access to previously unreachable areas. Flying from one side of Outland to the other (just because you can) is a lovely, chill experience.

GOLD RUSH *Unleash your inner goblin with these gold-making tips*



FAST TRAVEL

8 Make use of the Meeting Stones outside of dungeons to save time. Two players can now summon party members to the entrance of a dungeon or raid, so starting an instance is much quicker than it was in *Classic*.



DAILY GRIND

9 Will you choose Aldor or Scryer? The Shattrath factions are just two of the Outland hubs that offer new daily quests. Completing dailies rewards you with gold and reputation to unlock items and mounts, so look out for them.



HEROIC LEAP

10 The 'new' heroic dungeons require keys to unlock. Luckily, you can buy these once you reach the Revered reputation level with the relevant factions. So make sure you farm that rep as you work your way to level 70.



CENTRE STAGE

11 Karazhan is perhaps one of the most fondly remembered raids in WoW. Revisit its many bosses – including the Opera Event and quirky chess minigame – and try your luck getting the Fiery Warhorse's Reins, a mount drop from Attumen the Huntsman.



SPEED DEMON

12 If you hope to grab one of the new 310% flying speed mounts, you should work on your PvP Arena skills to obtain a Gladiator mount. Either that or hope that Ashes of Al'ar drops for you in phase two.



DIARY

PERSONAL ADVENTURES IN GAMES

CRUSADER KINKS

PART I

Spreading the love throughout Paradox's
medieval soap opera, *Crusader Kings III*

By Rick Lane

A wise man once said “Make love, not war”. That man would probably have died in a week in *Crusader Kings III*’s world, but that is not to say he didn’t have a point. All this scheming, fighting, and murder... where is the compassion for one’s fellow man?

I want to spread some love through the world of *Crusader Kings*, and I’m going to do it by creating the horniest dynasty in all of Christendom. I plan to take the game’s reputation as a dynamic bastard simulator literally, and attempt to conquer the world with the fruit of my loins, pushing the game’s relationship systems to their limits.

Before I start, first I need a ruler and a place for them to rule. I set the game to begin in the fateful year 1066, opting to play as the King of Scotland. This gives me a prestigious enough position so there’s plenty to do, but I’m still small fry compared to states like Byzantium or the Holy Roman Empire.

Rather than use the default ruler for that period in Scotland’s history, I instead create my own, specifically a strapping 27 year old with a beard you could lose a cat in. I set his sexuality to bisexual, as it increases his romance opportunities, then add the ‘lustful’ trait to his personality. I pick two further personality traits out of a hat, ending up with ‘cynical’ and ‘wrathful’.

LUST IN TRANSLATION

As for more general traits, I select three that will best aid his romantic aspirations, namely Seducer, Schemer, and Legendary Reveller. This results in a high Intrigue Stat, so to balance things out I give him poor Diplomacy and Stewardship, average Learning, and good Martial. Basically, he’s Game of Thrones’ Robert Baratheon, but with the circumspect mind of Varys the Spider.

All I need now is a name. First name has to be Randy. It has to be. As for Randy’s surname, I let *CKIII*’s name generator take care of that. After cycling through a bunch of highly Scottish surnames – Abernathy, Arbuthnot, etc, it suggests Cockburn. King Randy Cockburn. You can almost smell the nominative determinism.

King Randy Cockburn begins his reign single and childless. While I reckon he’d personally be fine with that scenario, the game’s rules are not. If Randy dies without

an heir, it’s game over. Therefore, my first goal is to find a wife and make some babies. After scrolling through a list of potential suitors, I select Infanta Ximena Gartziez of House Navarra. According to her character page, she’s a glutton and a sadist. But she’s also 21 and hornier than a Triceratops. Come to me, my lusty evil monster wife.

With matrimonial duties arranged, my other task is to select a Lifestyle for Randy. This is made easy thanks to his absurdly high Intrigue stat, for which there are three ‘focus’ trees. One of these focuses is Temptation, which commits your ruler to a life of “seduction, desire, and the gentle art of twisting people around your little finger”. Sold to the drooling ginger man on the throne!

KING RANDY COCKBURN BEGINS HIS REIGN SINGLE AND CHILDLESS

Basic admin done, it’s time to plan the broader objectives for Randy’s reign. There are two goals I’d like to achieve before he dies. First, I’d like to conquer the rest of Scotland, which is currently shared between myself, Norway, and a throng of Scots and Irish nobles. Second, I want to produce as many children as I possibly can. For the sake of my dynasty, of course.

ALL’S FAIR

No sooner has Randy saddled up his breeches, however, when he’s confronted by two immediate problems. The first is that Scotland is on the brink of civil war, thanks to a local noble forming a faction dedicated to removing Randy from the throne. My first thought is to start a scheme to seduce Duke Mael-Snechtai, but he’s heterosexual. So I hatch a scheme to murder him instead. After bribing some of his courtiers to join the scheme, they arrange for him to be attacked by bandits while on the road. The moment he’s dead, the faction disbands.

Not exactly the loving start to my reign that I wanted, but sometimes needs must. Speaking of needs, my other problem is that Queen Ximena doesn’t seem especially pregnant, so Randy is forced to begin a scheme to seduce

THE RULES

1. Ruler can only marry characters with the lustful trait (and if possible should have it themselves).

2. If romantic opportunities arise, they must be pursued.

3. Chaste characters must be expelled from court.



TOP: Young King Randy. Pantless, as is his wont.

LEFT: I hope this makes up for the terrible weather.



RANDY'S STATS	Age by diary end:	Wives:	Legitimate children:	Illegitimate children:	Total affairs:	Ongoing lovers:	Territorial conquests:	Territorial losses:	Murders:	Illnesses:
	45	1	6	3	6	3	6	2	1	1

» his own wife. He could also romance her, which would make her his soulmate. But I'm not interested in soulmates. I'm interested in children, and the process through which children are created.

Seducing your own wife is not exactly the behaviour of a legendary Lothario, and it appears King Randy knows this. No sooner has he embarked on the scheme, he wonders whether it's time to go through his neglected portrait collection to find himself a new lover (basically the medieval equivalent of scrolling through Tinder). I say what better time could there possibly be?

Randy can choose three potential suitors from his collection before making a final decision. The first portrait is from Countess Esclarmonda, the wife of the Count of Auvergne. She's sent Randy a full-on nude, causing him to swipe right faster than a southpaw boxer. The next couple are both attractive ladies, but are described as having personalities blacker than space, so he declines those. But the fourth portrait makes Randy's heart skip a beat.

It's the King of Sweden.

Clad in a chainmail vest and a rounded helmet with a neatly manicured blond beard, King Erik II is the epitome of Nordic strength and beauty. Randy goes through the motions of picking a third finalist, but his decision has already been made. Not only does a dalliance with a fellow monarch fire Randy's imagination, having a king in his bed could also be useful from a political perspective. He scribes a sensuous letter to Erik, and quickly receives a response. "Your radiant eyes are what gives meaning to my life," Erik writes lustfully.

Randy and Erik officially become lovers, but as kings in separate countries, it'll be a while before they can express their love physically. But for now there are plenty of boring, non-sex-related things to keep Randy's hands occupied, such as declaring war on the Isle of Man. This tiny, 30-kilometre strip of land between Britain and

Ireland is barely worth fighting over. But it's also the only claim Randy can realistically press at the moment, and by gum he's going to press it.

While conquering the island of three-legged men and no-tailed cats, Randy receives some good news. Queen Ximena is up the duff. He's only halfway through his bizarre seduction scheme too. Not that he plans to stop. That wouldn't be his style.

True to form, it isn't long before someone else catches Randy's roving eye. In this case, it's his chancellor, Duke Gospatric. Gospatric piques Randy's interest after a deft bit of diplomacy frees the king to declare war on the Isle of Man a second time (despite having already conquered it). Some time later, a tedious feast is brought to life by Gospatric's sparkling reading of *Nibelungenlied*, which as everyone knows is guaranteed to get the juices flowing.

MEMBER STATES

The relationships intensifies quickly from there. Gospatric starts following Randy around like a lost puppy, and it's a matter of days before they take to the bedchamber. As Randy himself puts it, "No sound has ever inspired such lust in me as the words he now whispers in my ear. There is no hesitation. No delay. No time for gentleness. There is only my desire." Crikey.

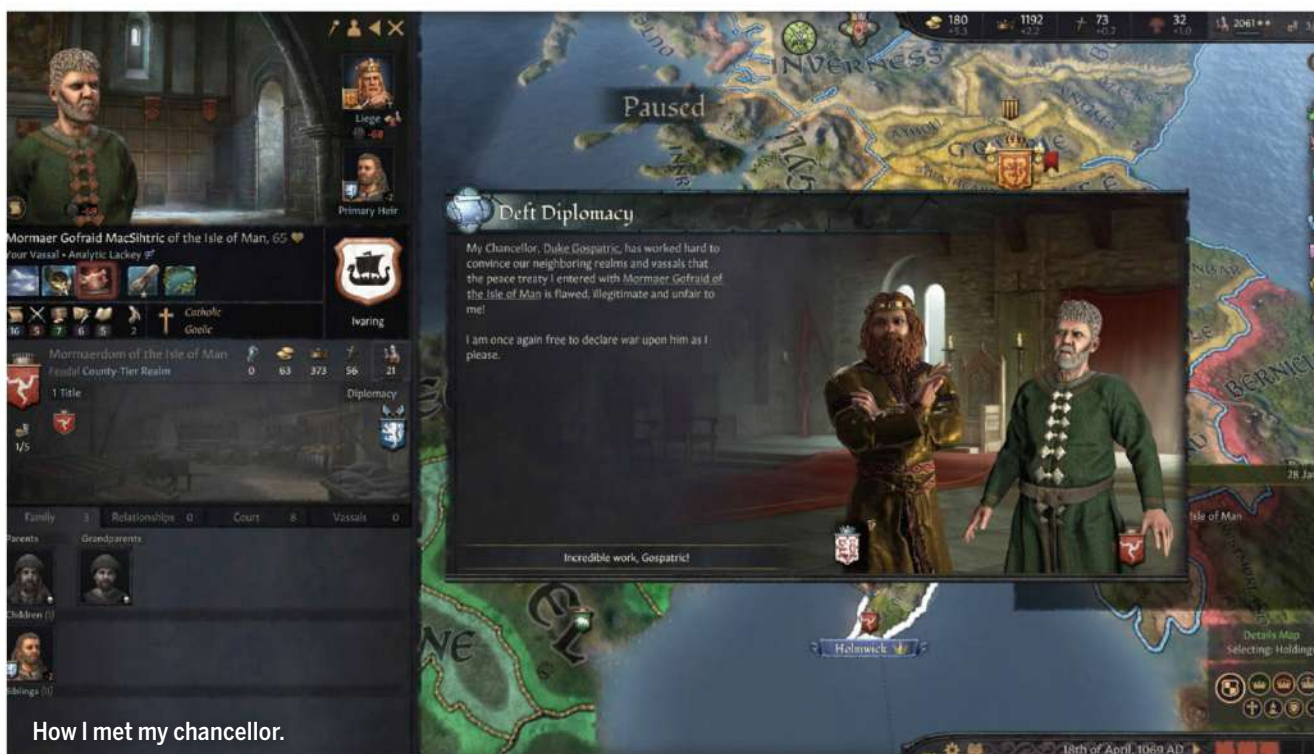
You might think that a wife, a king, and a chancellor might be enough to satisfy Randy's carnal cravings. And you would be wrong. No sooner has he clambered out of bed with Gospatric, Randy spies a female courtier named Malmure who shares his lustful personality. It doesn't take much to sway her – a rousing performance of *The Song of Roland* is enough to convince her.

While hopping between the beds of Gospatric and Malmure, Randy somehow finds time to press a claim on the province of Argyll. At the same time, however, Duke Morcar of Westmoreland snatches Cumberland from the

southern border, but Randy can't do much about it because he's tied up in Argyll (possibly literally if Gospatric is with him).

Randy is distracted from his many affairs by the death of his archbishop. It isn't the deceased Stigand himself who's the problem – the man was a creaking irrelevance. It's the new bishop, Beorhthem, who inexplicably accuses Randy of incest. It's about the only sin Randy hasn't committed. Randy easily blows off Beorhthem's nonsense. And no, not in that way.

Spurious accusations dealt with, Randy is free to enjoy the fruits of his labours. And Ximenas. She gives birth to a daughter, named Rodina, followed by a son a year later, named after his father. Slightly less welcome is the news that Malmure has given birth to a bastard. Randy considers





EVEN RANDY WONDERS HOW MUCH LONGER HE CAN KEEP ALL THESE AFFAIRS UP

claiming the boy as his own, but he's unsure what the ramifications will be, so he decides to keep it secret.

Like the bellies of Ximena and Malmure, Randy's realm continues to expand. Successful wars are fought against the houses of Carrick and Galloway, meaning the only parts of Scotland Randy doesn't control are the Hebrides, the southwest coast, and the northernmost tip. Oh, and Dunbar, which Duke Morcar nibbles off as he did with Cumberland. This is the last claim Morcar can press, however, so Randy reluctantly concedes.

Randy returns from his victories to find more children waiting for him. Ximena has given birth to a daughter, who, thanks to a slip of the keyboard, I accidentally name 'Helen\'. Meanwhile, Malmure is pregnant again, assuring Randy it is his. While still not claiming his illegitimate offspring, Randy at least finds Malmure a husband to take care of her. He doesn't stop shagging her, though, impregnating her a third time behind her poor husband's back.

On the other side of the coin, Gospatric, who apparently lost an eye during Randy's most recent conflicts

(at least, I hope that's how he lost it), introduces Randy to a 'friend' named Talore, a barkeep who is apparently capable of pulling kings as well as pints. It's all getting a bit confusing, frankly. Even Randy wonders how much longer he can keep all these affairs up, and the game subtly hints that I drop one of my lovers. "Romance is not about quantity, but quality!" Randy declares, before continuing with all his flings.

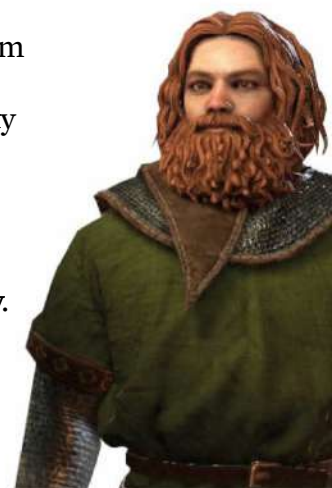
On the subject of quality, it's around this time that King Erik of Sweden rolls into town. After years of exchanging love letters and erotic carvings (colloquially known as stick pics), the two kings can finally spend a night of passion together. Randy clears his schedule and eagerly leaps into bed with Erik. Then he immediately leaps back out, horrified to discover that rugged, handsome King Erik is riddled with the pox. Randy cuts off the affair

immediately, while Erik slinks back to Sweden with his rotten tail between his legs.

Shaken by his brush with venereal disease, Randy turns his attention to his realm. He has a claim to press on the inner Hebrides, but the current lord of the domain, Petty King Gudrød Haraldsen, is married to the daughter of the King of Norway, resulting in a powerful alliance. Randy doesn't have the military strength to take on Norway. The alliance would be broken, however, if Gudrød's marriage had cause to be annulled...

It's time put Randy's seductive powers to more practical use. ■

ABOVE: Bishop Prick.





WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

THE OUTRAGEOUS LORE OF

WORLD OF WARCRAFT: THE BURNING CRUSADE

Through the Dark Portal is where Blizzard's imagination ran wild. *By Steven Messner*



LEFT: Outland was unlike anything seen in *Warcraft* before.



There was a time when *Warcraft's* story and lore wasn't etched in stone like it is today. Long before Blizzard published the three-volume *Warcraft Chronicle* – which spells out the origin story of the in-game universe with biblical grandeur – all we had to go on was quest text, cutscenes, and the *Warcraft III* user manual. And those mediums suited *Warcraft's* story just fine because there wasn't all that much to know. Humans and orcs hated one another, and Night Elves were at war with an army of demons led by a bad guy known as Sargeras.

For the first years of *World of Warcraft's* life, the MMO was largely invested in fleshing out the world of Azeroth. Players ventured across dozens of zones, learning about different cultures and histories while also rubbing shoulders with more exciting elements like the different dragon broods. It was all entrenched in generic fantasy. And then *World of Warcraft's* first expansion launched and players stepped through the Dark Portal and into a world that, by comparison, was batshit crazy.

Since *Burning Crusade Classic* brought back that 2007-era version of *WoW*, I've been having a great time exploring the world of Outland. It's full of ideas that are easy to take for granted considering how much *WoW* has evolved in the decade since. But back in the day, those same ideas were heretical for many players.

I AM THE LORE

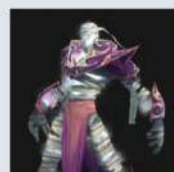
Until that point, Outland was the homeworld of the orcs. During the events of the original *Warcraft*

OUTLAND WHO'S WHO

The new races found in Draenor



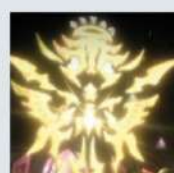
ARAKKOA
Highly intelligent avians that once belonged to an enormous empire that ruled atop giant spires in southern Draenor.



ETHEREAL
Mysterious mummy-like aliens who travel through space collecting and trading in arcane artefacts. Spooky lads.



GRONN
Ancestors of *Warcraft's* iconic orcs and ogres, the Gronn are towering monsters that used to rule over all of Draenor.



NAARU
Sentient beings of pure light, Naaru are basically the opposite of demons. Oh, and they have some spaceships.

games, they used magic to build a portal and invade Azeroth. Outland was the first time *Warcraft* ever toyed with the idea of a greater cosmos, but because we barely explored it in any of the games before 2007, players knew very little outside of the basic backstory for the orcs. That all changed when we stepped through the Dark Portal in *The Burning Crusade*.

ALIENS, INTERGALACTIC SPACESHIPS, AND FLOATING GLYPHS OF SENTIENT LIGHT



What players found on the other side wasn't just a new world to explore, but one that spit on *Warcraft's* roots as generic fantasy. Aliens, intergalactic spaceships and giant floating glyphs of sentient light – *Burning Crusade* laughed at people's expectations for what *Warcraft* was supposed to be.

The Draenei were easily the most controversial, thanks largely to how drastically Blizzard retconned the lore to make them fit in. Originally players thought they were little more

than another race living on Draenor, but they became intergalactic exiles who fled from Sargeras and his demon armies after they took over their home world thousands of years ago. And the only reason they were able to flee is thanks to a giant floating light god alien that lived in deep space that just so happened to have a spaceship for them to use.

The main city of Shattrath really echoed the Draenei's alien backstory. It looked like the ruined remnants of a far-future city now swarmed with refugees from various wars. And in its centre was a creature completely unlike anything in *Warcraft* to date: a floating crystal that was apparently a sentient creature from space. It was one of the Naaru, mystical beings of pure light that communicated to players through feeling and emotion.

It got even weirder. Once players ventured to Netherstorm, they soon discovered Tempest Keep. This interdimensional ship only arrived in Outland because some of the heroes who were stranded there in *Warcraft II* prayed and were heard by The Army of Light – an intergalactic army of do-gooders opposed to Sargeras and his Burning Legion.

Because *Warcraft's* lore is always expanding, these revelations now feel quaint. Hell, two expansions ago I rode one of those spaceships to the Draenei homeworld to imprison Sargeras permanently. But back then Outland was bold and audacious. It dismantled so many of our fragile theories and assumptions and replaced them with hints of strange new worlds and even stranger creatures, and while some players hated it, I thought it ruled.

I had grown up on *Warcraft* my entire life and wasted afternoons pouring through what few details were found in its in-game manuals. The world of Azeroth was already so big and mysterious, and all of a sudden Blizzard just tore the veil off and revealed the even bigger galaxy that surrounded it. ■

NEED TO KNOW

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RELEASED
January 16, 2007

OUR REVIEW
88

LINK
worldofwarcraft.com



RIGHT: Tempest Keep is actually several crystalline spaceships.





Before Io was covered in skyscrapers and smoke (and fungus).



POD: PLANET OF DEATH

Ubisoft's racer faces a second apocalypse. *By James Davenport*

Created as a graphical showcase, *POD* was an elaborate tech demo, a grim science fiction racing game that came baked in with a lot of computers using Intel Pentium or Pentium II MMX processors, and some AMD K6 systems. Back in 1997, it was one of the best looking games you could play.

If you grew up in the '90s and knew anyone into PC gaming, it was probably on their computer at some point. *POD* was one of those cultural artefacts that huge swaths of the public were involuntarily introduced to, like when They Might Be Giants' song "Older" came packed in with RealPlayer on so many early '00s HP prebuilts, or *Chip's Challenge* in a Windows 3.1 entertainment bundle. Ubisoft later released a retail version,

but *POD* was birthed from the same tradition as Norton Antivirus and McAfee: OEM software, baby.

Following one of the most essential PC gaming myth arcs, my uncle had a gaming PC in his basement, nested in one of those huge faux-mahogany desks that shouldn't have been able to fit through the door. The CRT was too big for its available surface area and audibly hummed for about two minutes after it was powered off, the keyboard stuffed into a wide drawer not meant for keyboards resting on a soldier's stew of thumbtacks, erasers, pencils, and pennies. A very domestic strain of cosmic horror.

But the dust illuminated by a tiny window (a fire code violation for sure) only elevated *POD*'s grimy, nihilistic excuse for racing. I almost felt like a two-faced booker, watching the races from some remote

warehouse location. The only thing missing was a cigar and a frosty mug of *spoog* or *grumm*, or whatever future wasteland beer alternative existed in *POD*'s universe. The whole thing foretold my obsession with *Thumper*, because *POD* was the first time I remember playing a game purely for the bad vibes.

FUN GUYS

It's the distant future on a planet very creatively named Io. Humanity builds a bunch of weird, bulky skyscrapers as fast as possible, eventually covering what looks like the entire surface area of the planet, all in the name of job creation. A capitalist critique is incoming, but no, humanity isn't its own undoing. This is a story about nature getting its revenge. And yes, it's a racing game, too, I promise.

A super fungus creeps out of the planet's surface and feasts on all those wacky skyscrapers – and mankind too, for dessert. People dip out on ships in droves until there's

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
1997

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft

PUBLISHER
In-house

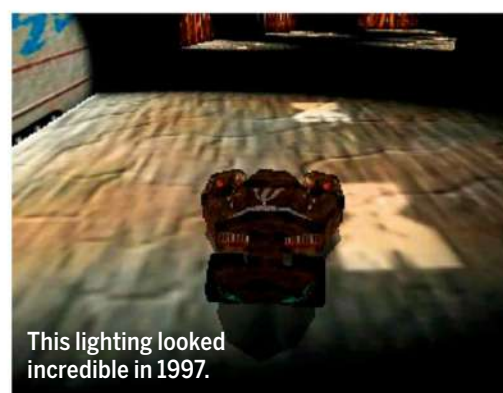
LINK
bit.ly/3wOZucj



LEFT: Driving through the sewers, as you do.

BELOW: We need to be more creative with road design.

RIGHT: Like driving down the alien's spine.



just one space taxi left. Naturally, every remaining human alive calmly agrees to conceptualize, plan, and enact an elaborate mid-apocalypse racing circuit for the final seat. The whole story is laid out in this elaborate, four-minute intro cutscene, where the music moves from synthy sci-fi to electric guitar power ballad. We go to space, see civilisations rise and fall, and cars shaped like bird feet crash into skyscrapers. At the time, it blew my head off. Today, it's incredibly dumb, but so are my sensibilities. God, I love *POD*.

Well, I love *POD* as I remember *POD*. I remember the most beautiful palette of greys and browns and greens and oranges streaking together I'd ever seen in a game. Beltane is a sprint down the city

freeway, a dour purple sky in contrast with the yellow glow of the last remaining skyscrapers with power. I love the surreal hillsides of Pompeii with its roads stretching out at impossible angles into the distance. Plant 21 is what Bowser's Castle would look like if it was set in an abandoned industrial shipyard, and if Bowser was a 50-year-old mob boss, I suppose. Then there's Roc, which imagines the art of HR Giger as a river, a psychosexual racetrack of spires and jet black organic-seeming pipes and machinery forming hypnotic, pulsing patterns on every surface. If you've ever wanted a track to make you horny and sad, *POD*'s got you. There's so much more to see, too. With over 30 tracks in the final

POD WAS ONE OF THE FIRST PIECES OF MEDIA TO MAKE ME CONSIDER THE END TIMES

version, it's worth at least checking out the sights in each.

I remember cars that felt heavy and powerful, and that every impact with another vehicle resounded with a deep impact that sold the fantasy of driving a future tank cobbled together with slabs of rusted, corrugated metal and gas line pipes refitted for the express purpose of going fast. I remember an overwhelming sense of menace and dread from the odd scenery running beside every track, and how the sharp angles of every car spoke to some alien knowledge of aerodynamics and technology. My mum's '97 Astro van looked even more like a cinder block in comparison – though, to be fair, it was very grey and very rectangular.

POD was one of the first pieces of media to make me truly consider the end times, and it was all filtered through *The Rule of Cool*. Ubisoft made an unnerving, sickly thing for my simple eight-year-old mind, whose only other conceptual

CAR-APACES *POD's weird cars remind me of stuff*



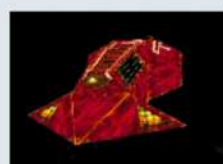
BAKAR
A salamander with knobby limbs.



GAMMA
That's a Hershey's bar, that is.



DOPPLE
A car fresh out of the wood chipper.



SHIVAN
I'm getting salamander again.

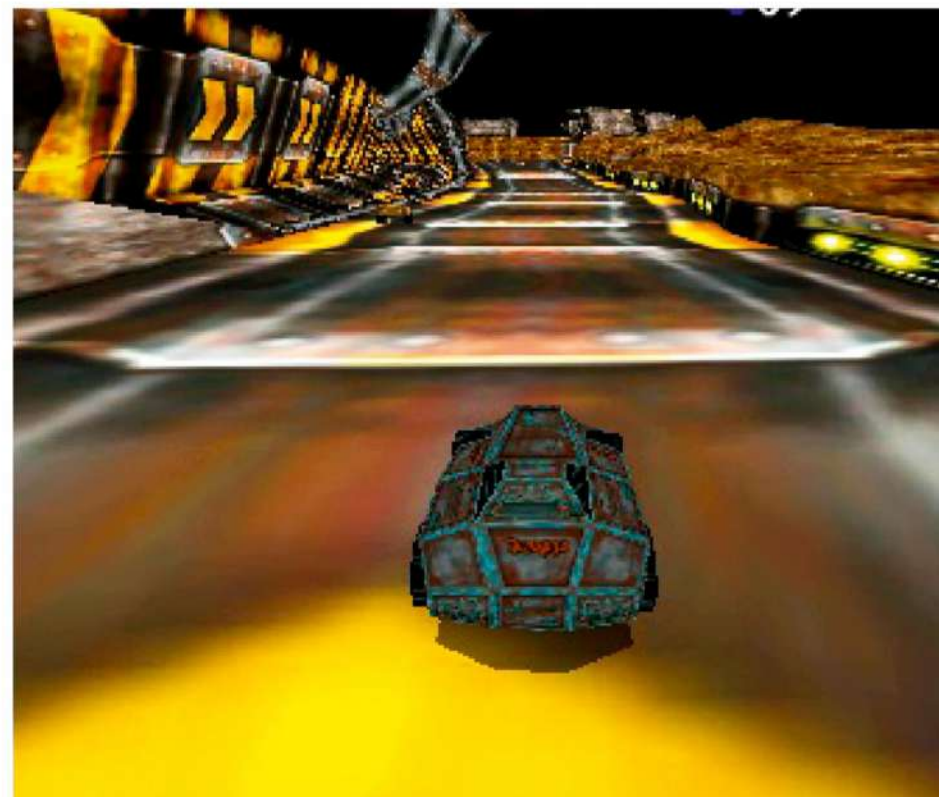


SCORP
POD's infamous chicken foot.



RIGHT: The UI is pretty, but the stats don't matter much.

BELOW: Nice weather, eh?



» playdates with the end of civilisation were limited to the dirt towns I made for the ants in the backyard. Even so, I couldn't look away. I didn't want to.

The truth is that, even though *POD* is easy to find and run through an updated version on GOG.com, it has aged far worse than I expected. If you play it anyway, find the *POD* entry on PCGamingWiki.com and install the PodHacks patch for some bug fixes and more flexibility with the forced 800x600 resolution, which can cause some issues on dual-screen setups. There's a widescreen hack too, though it breaks some of the skyboxes which I'd argue are The Point of *POD*. If you're one of these smug post-gamers like myself, maybe you can appreciate the game falling apart in front of your eyes. I do, but I don't go around telling people about it. Can you imagine being that insecure?

POD RACING

My hands are too big for the simple arrow-key controls, and cramped up after just a few races. Handling is awful too, with cars accelerating wildly from short taps of the keys. A seemingly deep stat system allows you to reallocate 300 points wherever you like, into braking, acceleration,

TOP: A texture glitch adds to the apocalyptic skyline here.

turning, and the like, though it doesn't add up to much in action. *POD* has a fixed meta, favouring speed and turning, so long as you've got the requisite track knowledge. You either get to know the tracks like the alleys of your hometown, or die.

POD plays into early racing game design, where success was primarily based on extremely granular muscle memory, both in track memorisation and turn acceleration. Staying on the course is the primary challenge. Avoiding the walls is the fun. Game design really has come a very long way since *POD*'s days.

But *POD* is so, so touchy and the tracks so narrow and crowded that you spend a lot of time bouncing off the railings and other cars. I'm reminded of *F-Zero*, the way you can get into a flow state of perfect key presses and depresses once you've built up enough familiarity with a track, but without the same sense of speed and far more abruptly windy, punishing turns. And if you have *POD*'s damage system turned on, getting through a single race is a monumental, frustrating challenge.

I respect the implementation of a damage system, especially to sell the

LAP TWO *Better racing games to revisit*



LEGO RACERS
Build your own custom car brick by brick, and use it to travel across time and space.



STAR WARS EPISODE I: RACER
Nice and fast, and you can turn sideways!



SONIC & ALL-STARS RACING TRANSFORMED
You can play as TF2's Heavy.



BURNOUT PARADISE
Nothing faster and more indulgent, and the soundtrack's ace.



Love the unexplained
white void.

fiction that these are shitty, rusted carapaces barely holding together – but the cars break down faster than I do looking at myself in the mirror. The landscape of my brain just isn't built for this kind of skeletal trial and error anymore. I am old now and have important stuff to do, like compulsively checking my phone and worrying for no reason.

One of these clips in my mind: murky brown skyscrapers on the horizon, a skybox like vomit, and my wheels sailing through the air over the main track below. I found a shortcut for the very first time in a racing game. I remember recognising them in later racing games, like *Star Wars Episode I: Racer*, where you had to not only make sharp, quick turns but flip your racer horizontally to squeeze through a tiny crevasse; or in *Lego Racers*, where an early track on an alien planet opens up a shortcut based on secret sequence of coloured gates you drive through.

Maybe *Lego Racer's* puzzle-solving and *Episode I: Racer's* needle-threading ruined me. *POD's* shortcuts are boring and bad, 90-degree turns into tighter hallways with the occasional ramp as a treat that barely saves time. I'm grateful to *POD* for teaching me to pay attention,

but in retrospect I feel a little cheated. Time is mean, man.

POD is preserved so well in my memories because of its simple premise, and for how evocative its courses and cars are of a world with an accelerated history in ruin, all without ever explicitly detailing the goings-on of the world. It might've been my first ever apocalyptic setting, and more than anything I remember the mood *POD* put me in.

TUNE IN

Music was a major component, with a soundtrack put together by Daniel Masson of *Rayman 2* fame. The score isn't very long, but it works on repeat. As you race, the same looping 15 minutes of trance play out, a steady journey from sparse celestial arrangements to more percussive industrial movements that wouldn't sound out of place in the original *Half-Life*. If you do play, I recommend turning down the SFX and juicing the music. Get rid of the other racers too and *POD* basically transforms into poor man's *Thumper*. Even though it's lacking the syncopation, it's a more immediately hypnotic way to play, at least before the arrow-key cramps ruin your hand for the day. If that's too much,

POD IS PRESERVED SO WELL IN MY MEMORIES BECAUSE OF ITS SIMPLE PREMISE

the 15-minute MP3 is right there for the taking in the *POD* game directory. Add that to your favourite playlist in WinAmp, throw on a good visualiser, do some future post-apocalyptic sci-fi drugs that don't exist, and shake out those cramps.

This might be the first Reinstall where I've actively ruined a game for myself, where I've written over strong childhood memories with the sad impatience only 31 years of adequately comfortable living can produce. But like the ending cutscene of *POD* – in which you barely escape the planet before it's completely enveloped in fungus and ride away on the final ship as *Io* blossoms, the literal crust of an entire planet splitting and flowering, farting out globules of pollen into the cosmos – it's OK to move on. Something else will take its place, like a huge-ass space flower, or more voracious evil colonisers, or *Mario Kart: Double Dash* or whatever. I don't know anymore. ■

ANDY KELLY



A varied selection of games this month, but with one piece of connective tissue: a killer story, sometimes literally.



OVERBOARD

inklestudios.com

→ Veronica Villensey has murdered her husband in cold blood, and you're going to help her get away with it. So basically *Overboard* is a murder mystery in reverse, where you're covering up the evidence rather than putting together the pieces. Excellent writing makes it work superbly.



BROKEN SWORD: THE SHADOW OF THE TEMPLARS

revolution.co.uk

→ This classic point-and-click adventure weaves real-world history with a gripping tale of cults, murder, and conspiracy. It's a true globe-trotting adventure, whisking you away to memorable locations including a Syrian marketplace.



RESIDENT EVIL VILLAGE

residentevil.com

→ The latest entry in the *Resident Evil* series is one of the most consistently entertaining. Structured like a wild, disturbing horror anthology, every area of the titular village presents a unique brand of scares – from frantic survival to subtle, slow-burning terror that eats away at your nerves.



STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

starwars.com

→ Set thousands of years before the original trilogy, this RPG is one of the most unique stories ever told in the Star Wars universe. As the Republic and the Sith go to war, an amnesiac joins the Jedi Order and learns a shocking truth about themselves.



BALDUR'S GATE II: SHADOWS OF AMN

bioware.com

→ This fantasy RPG is heaving with interesting stories, taking full advantage of its D&D setting. As you explore Amn, you encounter all manner of bizarre characters and get tangled up in deep, complex quests with surprising outcomes.



OVER THE ALPS

overthealpsgame.com

→ A tense spy thriller set in the days leading up to World War II. The story is told through postcards sent by the hero to a friend back in England. He recounts his adventures as a British agent and you decide what he writes – determining the route you take through short, but great, stories.



TACOMA

fullbrig.ht

→ Tacoma is a compelling sci-fi mystery set on an empty space station. Drifting somewhere between the Earth and the Moon, the lunar transfer station Tacoma lies empty. An incident has forced the crew to evacuate and you've been sent to recover Odin, its omnipresent AI.



YAKUZA 0

yakuza.sega.com

→ A real estate conspiracy might not sound like the most thrilling storyline, but *Yakuza 0* brings its plot to life with humour, pathos, and violence. Set on the streets of Osaka and Tokyo, this is an emotional rollercoaster of a game – and the perfect place to start the series.



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IT'S ALL OVER...

GOLDEN AGE

If the RTS genre can bounce back, then anything can. Let's bring back these other hallmarks of classic PC gaming



Dial-up modem noises

The internet shouldn't be silent – it's creepy. That series of beeps, whistles and wee-oo-wee-oos was a clarion call, heralding your arrival on the laggy virtual battlefield.



Off-white PC cases

A PC isn't a spaceship and it shouldn't look like one. Let's ditch the slick cases and RGB lights and bring back boxy machines that start the colour of eggshell and mature into a proud, filthy yellow.



CD-ROMs

Downloading a game seamlessly through the internet? There's no ritual to that, no drama. The act of installing a game off ten separate discs mentally prepares you for the glorious gaming ahead.



LAN parties

The camaraderie! The companionship! The smell! I can't think of any reason why now wouldn't be the perfect time to all start crowding together in small rooms again.



Unergonomic mice

Why should mice change to better fit the contours of our hands? I remember a time when the contours of your hand changed to better fit your mouse. A mark of dedication to the cause.



'PC gaming is dead' articles

Frankly, I miss being told my hobby had stopped existing every week. It made me feel like a rebel, a gaming outlaw. Plus it helped foster a healthy disrespect for games journalists.

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The new Alienware m15 R6 pushes past the limits of great-looking gameplay. With up to 360Hz* refresh rate, the latest NVIDIA® GeForce RTX™ 30-series graphics and 11th Gen Intel® Core™ processors, you can do anything but look away.

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